



BEST SELLER



Clifford Goldstein

MYSTORY

*"A stunning biographical account
of a classic spiritual struggle."*

Clifford Goldstein didn't believe in God. Yet he worshiped one anyway. His god was the bestselling novel he hoped he was writing, his typewriter an altar on which he offered sacrifices of obsessive devotion.

Clifford Goldstein did believe in truth. He just didn't know what it was or where to find it.

As the fiery writer traversed Europe and Israel in search of his novel's soul, his search for the meaning of life continued, becoming an obsession that led the irreverent radical to a different kind of altar.

An explosive confrontation takes place when Cliff's dream for literary fame and his quest for truth collide in a struggle for supremacy—a struggle that would wrench a life-changing challenge from his tortured soul: *"Show your face, God—if you have one—if you dare!"*

**Destiny**

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CLIFFORD GOLDSTEIN



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Chapter 1

Reprobate

Stretched on the lawn by the university library, I'm sunbathing my eyelids when a voice damns me to hell.

"You miserable reprobate! You are going to burn in the lake of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth!"

My eyelids roll back into my head. Towering over me, a black-suited preacher waves a leather-bound Bible in the air as he hurls warnings about damnation and judgment to students on the plaza—a few grassy acres between the library and other buildings on the University of Florida campus. I rise, cough up the dirtiest words my mouth can hold and spew them at him, but his voice blows the syllables back in my face as if I had spit in the wind. Disgusted, I retreat behind the library walls.

This confrontation was my first with the preacher on the plaza, where between classes students smoke dope, eat lunch, and relax in the sun. Life on the plaza is slow, ethereal, reminiscent of an impressionistic painting of women in long dresses sitting under white parasols in Paris parks.

Then the preacher arrives, and when the first word leaves his mouth, the soft melding colors that capture the mood of the plaza transform into harsh grays. Jed Smock

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has come to spread the good news. The holy war begins.

Some flee; others fight. No one is neutral. What Jed says, how he says it, forces a response. You either leave, or you listen.

Many listen. He draws dozens, at times hundreds, who circle him like a mob. Under the crushing sun, he stands in his black suit and preaches of eternal damnation, endless hellfire, and the love of Jesus. The students yell, curse, and heckle. One shirtless boy bursts out of the circle and—veins bulging in his neck—howls down Jed's throat. Someone baptizes Jed with Coca-Cola. Others sprinkle him with spit. A few dance lewdly around him, while one boy blows marijuana smoke in his face. A student with a thick blond beard dresses up in a nun's habit and spins blasphemous yarns that make the crowd spasm with laughter while Jed calls down the wrath of God upon the miserable reprobate doomed to eternity "in the lake of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth!"

My first attack, besides crude curses from the safety of the throng, is theological.

"Everything that happens," Jed proclaims, his hair black as his suit, "everything is God's will!"

"Oh, yeah!" I counter, emerging from the crowd and placing a fist under his Anglo-Saxon snout. "That means when I punch you in the mouth, that's God's will too?"

"You touch me," he snaps, "and you won't live to see the dawn."

Thus begins my relationship with the Reverend Jed Smock.

Actually, despite our bickering, I don't hate Jed, not at all. To be honest, I like him. The few times we talk alone, when he isn't howling about eternal damnation, and I am not showing off before the crowd, I think, *This guy isn't so bad*. Nevertheless, for the two years that I study at the University of Florida, when Jed comes, I stand inside the circle of students and curse him, his mother, his God, whatever he loves and believes in. I become famous all over town. I could be brooding over a Heineken in a dark

bar when strangers would shake my hand and congratulate me for "working over the preacher." My friends nickname me *Heckle*.

It fits. When Jed preaches, I hover over him like an evil angel, and if he gets the upper edge in our theological or philosophical dialogue, I lapse into mindless profanity that brings out the best in him.

"There's no hope for you!" he shouts. "I have seen lots of reprobates before, but there is *no* hope for you, you miserable degenerate. You are going to *burn* in hell forever. Do you hear me? Forever!"

Once, as we verbally wrestle before an enthusiastic audience, he hisses, "Why don't you just get out of here and leave me alone?"

"Why don't *you* get out of here, yourself," I retort, "you illiterate redneck."

It's not that I'm cruder than other hecklers. I'm not. I am just more persistent.

"Why," a friend asks, "do you spend hour after hour out there with that idiot?"

I don't know. Being Jewish has something to do with it, I'm sure. Bitter about all the persecution done to Jews in the name of Jesus, I think that Christians don't deem Christ's Jewish blood enough to atone for their sins. They need more Jewish blood as well, which is why they have spilled ours for centuries. When I look at Smock, his fervor, his fanaticism, I envision him on a flashing black steed, a spear in one hand, a cross in the other, spreading the good news to the Jews as their flesh sizzles on stakes. Harassing Smock is, I suppose, my revenge for 1,500 years of persecution.

"You'd better accept Jesus," he warns us, "or you will burn!"

Jesus? Accept Jesus? I don't accept Moses, much less Jesus. To me, the Bible is the ranting and raving of a bunch of flea-bitten camel herders who, tired of lugging clumsy stone idols across the desert, made up this notion of a god they couldn't see, and named him Jehovah.

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Religion is myth, hidden dream symbols locked in the subconsciousness of sexually repressed ancients who scribbled their Freudian frustrations on brittle scrolls.

No wonder I'm bitter. Killing for a cause that could be weighed and measured—like beheading a tyrant who locked his people in chains—is one thing. But to kill for fairy tales? For myths? When I think of Jews herded into buildings that were torched while the saints outside sang impassioned praises to a god who never existed—to a god who was a myth—my anger rises like the heat of a synagogue burning. If I can't avenge those murders, at least I can humiliate Smock.

One time, however, Jed humiliates me. We have been engaged in an incessant volley before the crowd. I follow right on his heels. He tries to shake me loose by wandering within the circle, but he would have better luck shaking loose his shadow at noon. Finally he turns and confronts me. "You who scream the loudest," he snaps, "seek the hardest!"

My mouth hangs open. Whatever obscenity I planned to hurl chokes me instead. Jed has stripped me bare. *Come on, Jed, even I don't play that dirty.* I look at the crowd; they look at me. They know. My macho showmanship, fearless assaults, and bravura all peel away. My true color, the one hidden under my loud, foul mouth, is exposed. I crawl back into the masses and hide.

Smock's statement forces me to confront a truth about myself: I am a seeker, and perhaps that aspect of my psyche prompts me to spend hours with Smock or with the other religious people. Funny, despite my disdain for religion, I am inexplicably drawn to those who believe.

Sometimes the Hare Krishnas come to the plaza, about half a dozen robed in faded orange. They sit on their blankets and serve vegetarian food to the students. The Krishnas—their bald heads glistening under the sun—monotonously bang away on cymbals and little drums whose sounds softly roll across the plaza like patches of rhythmic fog. I stand in line, my white paper plate in

hand, waiting for food and lemonade. I look at the Krishnas, their dress, painted faces, cropped hair, and think, *Look what these people have done because of their beliefs!*

The one thing, the *only* thing I admire about Jed is his sincerity. *He believes!* He must; otherwise, why would he continually confront the screaming foul-mouthed hordes that he does? Something burns inside that man as hot as the lake of fire he constantly consigns me to. Yet looking at the Krishnas, their shaved heads, their painted faces, as they dance in orange pajamas and howl at the moon, I realize that *they must believe too!*

I am captivated, not so much by what Jed or the Krishnas believe, but by the nature of their belief—especially when I believe in nothing. How, in the age of Einstein, Apollo, and proton beams, can these people believe in God—when I don't know what to believe, how to believe, or even if I should believe?

One night, as a teenager in Miami Beach, I am in a riot. Police are clubbing and arresting rioters, mostly other bored teenagers like myself. Tear-gas canisters hurl through the night like comets. Amid the chaos a rioter yells out, "Man invented God!"

"That's interesting," I say, stopping in my tracks. "Why do you think man invented God?"

Amid the tear gas, riot police, and hurling rocks, I want to talk about God—but then a cop with a club, a gas mask, and a black helmet descends upon us. We flee, never finishing the discussion. I am intrigued by the idea that man invented God. That idea seems to explain everything.

I snoop around the Krishna temple, a five-minute walk from my apartment at college, which I share with three other students. From the outside, the temple looks just like a large ramshackle house amid other large ramshackle houses. Inside, however, incense curls around corners, Eastern music bounces off of walls, and dancing feet pound floors. Children dressed in orange scamper about like tiny bursts of fire. On a chair above an altar

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covered with flowers sits a framed portrait of their leader, an old bald Hindu.

I talk to one Krishna, his dark stubble coming through his shaved head like a porcupine. I ask him about the Krishna belief that the Americans never went to the moon. He shows me from the Vedic Scriptures that the sun is closer to the earth than the moon. Therefore, the Krishna says, the Americans couldn't have landed there.

"What about all those moon landings on television?" I ask.

"They faked it," he assures me.

The Krishnas invite me to tour India with them. Though I'm not interested in becoming a devotee, the prospect of seeing India with the Krishnas fascinates me. But I'd have to drop out of school for a semester, and I don't think my Jewish mama would understand my leaving school to wander around India with a bunch of bald-headed Hindus who think NASA faked the moon landings. My roommates think I'm crazy. I think that they're probably right. I forget the whole thing.

One morning, I stop by a Mormon display set up in front of the cafeteria on the campus.

"Why," I ask a skinny, red-haired teenage girl with zits who attends the booth, "have the Mormons been persecuted so much?"

"Because," she boasts, "*we have the truth of God.*"

Of course, you do. Doesn't everybody? A few days later I read in the *Miami Herald* that the Mormon Church defrocked a minister for ordaining a black man. *The truth of God? Phooey!* Another example of the suffering, the racism, the ignorance that these man-made gods and religions have inflicted upon humanity. I type out a bitter letter to the *Alligator*, the school newspaper, which prints it. A week later, sitting in the library, I see my name under attack. A Mormon has replied, telling me to keep my mouth shut so the world won't know what a fool I am. I hammer out a vehement attack on Mormonism. That letter is printed, and I daily scour the letters section for a

response. Nothing happens. Then I sit in a room before English class starts when a fellow with sandy hair and thick glasses approaches and extends his hand. Without getting up, I stick out mine.

"Phil McLemore," he says.

"Who?"

It hits me. He wrote the letter in the school paper. We go into the hall. He explains why Mormons, even though they don't ordain blacks, are not racists. I don't follow his logic.

"Well," he says, "it might not seem logical to you, but it is logical, anyway."

I ask how he found me. He points to a girl sitting in the classroom. With an embarrassed smile, she looks away. Her father is the head of the Mormon student center at the university. Since my first letter, the Mormons have been looking for me. The girl, McKay Christensen, had no idea that it was *Clifford Goldstein* sitting next to her. She knew me just as Cliff, until I was arguing with someone in class who blurted out, "The Mormons are right about you, Goldstein!" The next day, McLemore comes.

Through McKay I meet more Mormons, who invite me to spend Christmas with them. I don't plan to go home for the holiday. Instead, I will sit in the apartment alone, drink beer, and read Dostoevski novels. I decline their offer until a Mormon says the magic words.

"There will be plenty of food."

I sit in the Mormons' warm comfortable houses, the fireplaces crackling, their holiday tables heaped with steaming food, the smells suffusing through the house like Krishna incense. Swarms of clean, well-behaved children wander through the houses, their giggles and sobs mixing with the smells of dinner. The Mormons laugh, tell stories, sing. They show me kindness, hospitality, even if before the entire university I insulted them, their faith, their church. The atmosphere exudes a warmth and a love that penetrates me. A longing, an aching for something I don't have but clamor for, rumbles within. A dull thud aches in my chest.

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They study with me. I sit with two chunky missionaries and McKay in a small room—the library at the Mormon student center across the street from the university. They show me pictures of Joseph Smith and the golden tablets, and tell about the angel Moroni. They talk about baptism, about life after death, about why they don't drink coffee or tea or alcohol. I ask questions, some just to be obnoxious, such as why did Joseph Smith have dozens of wives, and if I become a Mormon can I have a dozen wives too. They handle me gently, kindly, even giving me a book written by a Jew who became a Mormon.

I go to a Mormon New Year's Eve party. The atmosphere is definitely disco. Lights flash on the dance floor, heavy-metal music hammers the walls. These people don't drink, smoke, or curse, yet they dance to hard rock? One song is a raunchy, sexually explicit ballad complete with sound effects. I sit, ten minutes to twelve on New Year's Eve, a glass of V-8 juice or something between my palms, with a roomful of dancing Latter-Day Saints while a woman's panting breath pours out of a stereo. I gulp the V-8 down hard.

Once, after a study in the library, we get on our knees. When one of the missionaries prays, I burst out laughing. She waits for me to stop, then resumes. I laugh again. Peeking through one eye, I see a woman on her knees talk to the ceiling. I try to hold the laughter in, but it squeezes out from between my lips, like a balloon leaking air from its nozzle.

As a small child, I'm on my knees beside my bed, praying. My father peeks in, to check on me before I sleep. I get in bed quickly. He sits down next to me and asks what I am doing. I feel funny. I say that I am praying to God. What am I praying about? I say I'm asking that everything will go good in school and at home and that I will get good grades. He's not mad, but I feel so funny at being caught that I never do it again.

My roommates return, unsympathetic to Mormonism.

"Next thing we know," says Larry, a tall thin Jewish boy from New Jersey, "you are going to start praying in the airplane."

"I won't worry about that."

Classes start, and I forget the Mormons. One night, when I am working at an Exxon station across from the school, the two Mormon missionaries drive in. They ask me if I would like more study.

"Naw," I say. "I suppose if I became a Mormon I would be happier than I am now. But I'm happy enough."

I never hear from them again.

One day, working at the station, I meet a short, dark-haired girl who stands in the street selling roses to drivers who brake at the light. She has a British accent. I ask what she is doing in Gainesville.

"I'm 'ere," she says, "to see my guru."

After work, I go home, scrub off the grease, change clothes, and follow her to a meeting. I sit on the floor in a house filled with people called *Premies*, who talk about their guru, whom they worship as God. The *Premies*, mostly in their twenties and thirties, consist of clean-cut professionals who drive up in BMWs, or spaced-out druggies with empty stares as if they have two glass eyes each. The guru—who became god as a teenager after his father, who was god before, died—lives close to Gainesville, which is why so many *Premies* flock to the area.

They share their latest experience at a previous meeting held by the guru. They had lined up by the hundreds in a stadium, each with \$50 in their hands. As they approached the guru, who sat on a throne, they forked over the \$50 to one of his aides, who faithfully oversaw the thickening wad while the *Premies* kissed his holiness's feet.

I ask one *Premie* about the wisdom of paying all that money just to slobber on the guru's big toe.

"It's worth every cent," he says.

I am, of course, skeptical that this fat nineteen-year-old guru, who rides around in sports cars, watches TV westerns, and stuffs his round jowls with ice cream, is the Lord of the Universe. Yet one thing fascinates me. The *Premies* all talk about "taking knowledge," their initiation into the faith.

I have been a skeptic my whole life. If something can't be broken down chemically, analyzed, or placed in a test tube, then it does not exist. I no more believe in the supernatural than I do in Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. Yet a passionate curiosity burns within me as to what religious people experience. What I want to know, to feel for myself, is what these *Premies* experience when they "take knowledge." Or what are Christians tapped into when they talk about receiving the "Holy Spirit"? My upbringing and education taught that religion is a psychological and emotional illusion. Yet, all religious people talk about experience. I long for a spiritual experience, if for no other reason than kicks.

One summer afternoon in Gainesville, I walk along a country road, a warm shower gently tumbling over me. The sun, shining between the drops, diffuses into sprays of liquid light while the fields, muffled under a white mist, crackle like morning cereal. I raise my arms and allow the water to drench me. It trickles behind my ears and along my spine.

I have been reading about Eastern mysticism, reincarnation, and cycles of life. To me, rain was always just rain, good for farmers, bad for sky divers. But today, it's part of the endless cycle of life. It is life! I lean my head back, open my mouth, and drops of water hit my tongue like wet sparks. Perhaps these drops I swallow were once part of the fluid in which I first floated in my mother's womb. Perhaps they flowed through the umbilical cord. Perhaps they are the drops that first fed me life.

They feed me again today. I close my eyes and run my fingers through my thick black hair. Rain cascades down my back. I raise my hands again toward the source of my life, of all life. I am in the midst of a cycle of life.

My first real spiritual experience!

Or am I just a jerk walking around in the rain?

I attend more meetings. When I prod the *Premies* about what happens when they are initiated into the faith, they say that I need to experience it myself. One night, at my

apartment, I answer the phone. It's the *Premies*. They want to initiate me into "taking knowledge."

I look up. My roommates bathe in television light. Accounting majors, they work with numbers, things real, tangible, solid. Their deepest mysteries can be solved with a slide rule or pocket calculator. They exist in three dimensions only. They don't talk about the nature of God, or even if God exists—questions that cling to me like my own soul.

Though amused at my spiritual ramblings, my roommates don't understand them, or care to. But this guru stuff, if they knew, would be too much. What would they do if I hung up a picture of the fat guru, all decked out in his kingly robes, on the living-room wall? I don't think that would happen because I don't believe that kid is God. *But everyone who takes knowledge does! Could it happen to me too?*

"No thank you," I shout. "I'm not interested!"

I slam the phone so hard its bell echoes.

I can't understand my roommates. I know why people might not go gaga over the guru as the *Premies* do, or why they might not become a howling Bible-thumper like Jed Smock. But not to care at all? I don't accept what Jed preaches or what the Krishnas believe or what the Mormons or any of these religious fanatics teach. But at least they ask the important questions. I reject their conclusions, but they ask, seek, and look for answers, while my roommates don't even care.

"Don't you ever think about God?" I ask Jon, an English major like myself, one night at a party. "Do you ever really wonder if God does exist? Or if He does exist, who is He and what does He ask of us? Did you ever think that maybe Jed Smock or the Krishnas or any one of those groups might be right? Wouldn't you just love to know the truth about Jesus or Mohammed or Buddha? Do you ever really seek after God?"

"No."

I gulp my drink. It's not V-8.

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One morning after class, I wander by a display of the Gainesville chapter of the Revolutionary Student Brigade, the campus Communists. Having read some of my letters in the school newspaper, they invite me to a meeting. I follow them to a scroungy apartment piled high with books, tracts, and magazines covered with pictures of red stars, hammers, sickles, and Joseph Stalin. They seem nervous, on edge at first, and no one says much. Then one fellow begins questioning me intently.

"What are you doing all the time on the plaza? Why aren't you in class? Why are you always walking around there?"

I explain that I *am* in class, but not always, and when free, I hang around the plaza because I like to talk with all the different people there. Convinced that I am not a junior J. Edgar Hoover sent to infiltrate them, they launch into a tirade about overthrowing the capitalists, the bourgeois, the rich, and the oil companies.

I go to two or three more meetings, hand out a few leaflets, and once even march with them and some Iranians whose only English consists of the phrase, "Shah *fascheest!* Shah *fascheest!*" But Karl Marx, Mao Zedong, and Joseph Stalin don't satisfy the spiritual lusts of my soul. If anything, their answers are so shallow, so petty, I realize that truth—wherever it may be—definitely isn't in *Das Kapital* or *The Quotations of Chairman Mao*. Besides, it is 1977, and what could be more boring than Communism?

When not on the plaza, I inhabit the second floor of the old library building. The reading room, like an old cathedral, has a high ceiling that reaches heavenward, and I sit for hours cloistered by cushions of silence, interrupted only as a scrape of a chair or a slam of a book ripples across the room. Unlike the new buildings, whose cold, sterile interiors look like laboratories—this reading room with its musty volumes and high ceiling ignites in me images of philosophers probing the great questions of life.

And here—immersed in warm rays that pour through the windows by day, or in icy ceiling light by night—I read these philosophers: Sartre, Camus, Kant, Hegel, and Spinoza, men who attempt to discern the secrets of existence. At times, as I read, I catch a stream of thought, a progression of ideas, and I ride their brainwaves to the crest, exhilarated at having tapped into the minds of some of the world's greatest thinkers. These moments are my religious experiences, my spiritual highs, even if my gods are but men whose bones now rot.

Indeed, my deities are just smarter, more articulate, and more driven versions of myself. They all ask the same questions I do, though they have the audacity, drive, and talent to try to answer them. Yet after I read their works, not only do the questions remain, but new ones arise, and more leaps of faith are needed. After all their philosophical and epistemological wanderings, no matter how brilliant and logical, they don't seem any closer to truth than when they started.

Albert Camus is my Horus, chief deity in my expanding pantheon of philosophical polytheism. He asked all the right questions, expressed all the right fears. In Camus I see myself stomping the ground or shaking a fist at the sky, except that he does it so eloquently. But amid all his beautiful prose, I find no answers. He only better defines my anxieties. He opens up my wounds, shows me clearly my pain, but leaves me bleeding worse than before. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* he writes, "There is only one real serious philosophical problem, that of suicide. To judge that life is or is not worth the trouble of being lived, that is to reply to the fundamental question of philosophy."

After civilization upon civilization, culture upon culture, philosophy upon philosophy, here we are in the twentieth century, sitting on the shoulders of 5,000 years of recorded history—and one of our greatest voices says that the only truly important question is whether or not man should kill himself? This, to me, is not progress!

Yet I am recklessly open-minded—a spiritual and philo-

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sophical harlot. I will give anyone a chance to penetrate my mind, to fill me with himself. I have no intellectual taboos. I will slip between the sheets of any book that beckons. If Camus is right and suicide is the only real question for man, then I am ready to confront it—which I do. But after a little thought I decide *Naw, I don't want to kill myself.*

My philosophical harlotry gives me an exhilarating sense of freedom. Unlike Christians, who always run to their Bibles; or the Krishnas, who run to the Vedics, I am not locked in to any belief system. I can pursue truth without shackles, without preconceived ideas, without boundaries, rules, or regulations. I will read anything—from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to *The Adventures of Howdy Doodly*—if it can put pieces together. I can take a little from here, from there, from everywhere, and build my own customized worldview.

Unfortunately, my views always change. I have such radical reversals of thought, and so frequently, that I become cynical of knowing anything. Why get fanatical, or even mildly committed, to a philosophy or system of belief when tomorrow I may no longer believe it? Why become a eunuch for the kingdom of God, when two weeks later I may become an Epicurean? Why drop out of school, shave my head, and chant "Hare Krishna" to any one of the millions of gods whom the Krishna worship, when a year later I could be an atheist? Why die in the streets for Communism, when next year I may be a Mormon? Repeatedly, just when I think I have answers, something I read or hear shatters them, and I stumble amid ruins of broken facts, premises, and hopes. I have changed views so many times that whatever I believe obviously can't be truth because it's always changing, sometimes even contradicting what I believed a week before.

One evening I wander out of my second-floor sanctuary and into a pizza joint. I'm drinking beer, eating a pepperoni pizza, and reading Spinoza when I come upon something that grips me. Spinoza says that to live the

most perfect life, we need to find out why we are here and then live accordingly.

Instantly, all the years of being taught that truth is relative, that existence precedes essence, that there are no absolutes—it's all wiped out, as if Spinoza entered my head and severed the nerves that wired these beliefs within. Forgetting all the ontological arguments about existential dilemmas, Hegelian dialectics, and Cartesian duality—I know one thing: I exist, and because I am here I had to come from somewhere. But to know from where, and why—this is the essence of all truth. Somewhere, objective truth, *the truth*, must exist because I exist.

I lift my eyes from the words. After years of searching, questioning, for the first time I have one objective absolute to grasp: *I exist*, and as corny and simple as it sounds, this fact means that there must be an objective absolute that explains my existence.

But what is that truth? That question is crucial. How can I live right if I don't know the purpose of life? Imagine a native Indian from the jungle who, given a car, grows a garden in the trunk, uses the seats as a bed, and blow-dries his hair with the exhaust pipe. He's getting some use out of it, but not the best because he doesn't know what the purpose of the car is. If I don't know what the purpose of life is, I can get by, but something will be missing, lacking, just as with that native and the car. This concept seems so Mickey Mouse, so basic, yet I will never be the same for realizing it. I now know that what I have been looking for all along are the answers to the basic question of how did I get here and why.

If it is humanly possible to know truth—why am I here, how did I get here—then I want to know, no matter the cost. No matter where it leads me, no matter what I must suffer, no matter how painful truth is—I want to know!

I walk back to the reading room. I've just had another one of those radical philosophical changes that usually leave me spinning. But now I have something to grasp. I know that an absolute truth must exist because I exist. If

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there is no God, that's fine; if there is, then I want to know who He is and what He wants of me—and I will do it. I realize that I might never know truth. It might not even be humanly possible, or I might have it in my grasp but not know it and change for something else. All I know is that *if* I can learn what truth is, I want it.

One Sunday morning, I go to hear a man who, once a local college professor, has declared himself a prophet. I drive to a country retreat outside Gainesville, where I sit on the floor in a room with pictures of holy men—from Buddha to Jesus—and meditate while the prophet (his name is Mickey), with long hair and a beer belly, sits at the microphone and talks and sings about whether we exist. *Hey, man, I've answered that one already.* He says other profound things like, "Don't worry about your future—it's none of your business." All I get for my time are cramps in my legs.

I often talk with evangelical Christians, usually in the school cafeteria at breakfast. Though I don't agree with anything they say, I feel compelled to listen, to talk, to argue anyway. I sit over scrambled eggs and coffee, sometimes for hours, even missing class as we talk.

I have a friend, an owner of a yogurt shop, who goes to the same church as these Christians, and one evening in his shop I meet their pastor, a dark, curly-haired Italian with a belly the size of a truck tire. He says he knows about my discussion with his church members. We talk about Christianity, and I tell him that if what he believes is not true, "then not only are you living a lie," I taunt, sticking my finger in his gut, "but you are spreading that lie as well."

My Christian friends invite me to church for a midweek prayer meeting. Someone reads a verse: "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" I sit in the back, bored, wishing that I hadn't wasted my time. Young people, students, talk about all the "exciting things" happening in their lives with Jesus. *Nothing looks too exciting here to me.* Then they pray.

It happens again. I try to stop but can't. I drop my head, as if in prayer, too, but I fool no one. Desperate, I jam my hand in my mouth, but the sounds squeal out. When I dare to look up, I see heads turned, one eye open on me, one eye closed for Jesus. The saints aren't giving me such saintly looks. Even when I finally manage to plug the noise, my body quivers from laughter.

They don't invite me back.

And, of course, I continue my theological debates with Jed Smock on the plaza.

"Hey, Jed, if your God is real, let Him drop a six-pack of Budweiser, two bottles of Dewar's White Label, and an ounce of cocaine from heaven—then I'll believe!"

"You miserable reprobate! You are going to burn in hell forever!"

"It's going to be hot down there. Can I at least have my Budweiser?"

"Do you hear me—forever!"

Chapter 2

Free-Fall Junkies

I have another passion, one that burns as feverishly as does my quest for the truth of the universe: sky diving!

I'm in a beat-up old Cessna 180 climbing beyond 7,000 feet. Five of us jam inside—four sky divers hunched on the floor while Harold, our "sky diver driver," the only one with a seat, taxis us through the clouds. I'm snug in the back corner, opposite the exit and behind the pilot seat.

The door has been removed, so wind circulates in the plane, but under my red jumpsuit, yellow hockey helmet, and two parachutes tightly packed in a blue rig, I sweat. As we near altitude, I push myself up and painfully squat. I check my altimeter, straps, and ripcords. John, the jumper nearest the exit, leans out and looks at the ground to determine where we should jump, his cheeks flapping like a flag. He motions with his hands—left, right, or straight—to Harold, who steers the plane accordingly. John then turns to him, nods his head, and runs a finger across his throat. Harold eases up on the throttle. The engine whines down.

John climbs out and hangs on the far end of the strut, where it connects to the middle of the wing. As soon as he steps out, the plane shifts slightly under his weight. Gary, following him, hangs on the strut alongside John, their legs

dangling in the wind. Tenaflly, my roommate, eases out next. He hangs onto the strut, one foot on the step below the exit, the other dangling in the air. I plant myself in the doorway, my hands bracing the sides, my heels arched high, ready to spring. The wind, crisp, cool, and insanely loud spools through the propeller that howls just a few feet away sucking us through the sky as our jumpsuits flap like sails in a storm.

"READY! ONE! TWO! THREE! GO!"

As soon as they fall, I dive into a loud splash of air. The noise and the wind suddenly vanish, and I hang suspended as if in an airy, tranquil silence. As I accelerate, the wind gets louder, beating against my jumpsuit. I stabilize out, spread-eagle, 120 miles per hour—straight down!

About fifty feet below me, John and Gary, with over 2,000 jumps between them, hook up, arm and arm, facing each other like wrestlers. Tenaflly, another "Hundred-Jump Wonder" like myself, flies in and grabs onto them, making a three-man star. I have fifteen seconds to make it four.

As I pull my arms and legs in closer to my body, I accelerate. I approach them, my eyes locked on the grips of Tenaflly and John, who are arm in arm on the side of my approach. About twenty feet above them and five feet out, I spread out my arms and legs to slow down. If I come in too fast, I will break the star; if I come in too slowly, I will lose my momentum and drift away. I glide in, so close I can hear the wind stream past them until they are within my grasp and I reach out and latch onto the arms of John and Tenaflly, two handfuls of jumpsuit locked in my grip. They release each other and pull me into the star.

I'm in! For the first time, after numerous attempts in which I either flew over, under, or crashed into the star, I fly in fourth! Howling, I stare into three sets of teeth grinning brightly in the sunlight. We fly our four-man across the heavens for only a few more seconds because earth comes up fast. We break apart, turn around, and, pulling our arms behind our backs, we take off in different directions like jets in an air show. After a few seconds I bring my arms

back around, look up to make sure that no one is over me, and wave—the signal that I am about to open. I reach in with my right arm, grab the ripcord, and pull. I feel the parachute pop off my back. I am jerked as it explodes overhead. Sounds like a giant drain emptying.

I hang, feet to the ground, in calm silence. I look up to check on my parachute, a yellow-and-black Russian PC. Instead of a full, round canopy, I see a tangled mess!

I gasp. I shake the lines, but that does nothing. At any moment the canopy can collapse, and I will be back in free fall. I look at the ground. A forest 2,500 feet below awaits me.

I have to “cut away” from my tangled main and open my reserve—the emergency procedure that I have been trained for but never needed. I need it now.

I lift two metal covers that sit on each shoulder. A wire ring under each one springs out. I slip my thumbs through each ring. I look up one last time. The canopy sits, still as death. I take a deep breath and pull down on the rings. I hear a light clink as the metal parts separate. I am back in free fall. I tear out the ripcord for my reserve parachute, which sits tightly packed on my back, just below my neck. I gain speed. The wind gets louder and louder. Why am I still accelerating? The trees start rushing up toward me. OH, MY GOD, WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME! My reserve hasn't opened at all! The trees come up faster, almost to a blur. With a heightened awareness of everything around me, I think of my mother, my life, and how sad it all seems to die. I look over my shoulder, to see what is wrong, to see if there's hope, and by turning my head my whole body turns and the wind catches the flap on my reserve and the parachute in an explosion of white opens so hard that I grunt from the shock of stopping so suddenly.

I hover, in silence again. Usually, my main canopy, full of color and design, looks like an exotic flower when open over my head. The reserve, pure white, looks only like a mushroom. What a beautiful mushroom!

In the distance, the main parachute, twisted and tangled

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like a broken kite, falls to earth.

A voice calls from the sky over me. "Cliff, are you OK?" Tenaflly hovers overhead.

"Yeah, yeah!" I shout, trying to sound unruffled. "Follow my main. I don't want to lose it in the trees!"

I ride down, silently, and as my feet touch earth, the canopy wilts over me like a dying flower. I land alongside a road about half a mile from the airport. A friend in a red van picks me up.

For the next two weeks, whenever I close my eyes, all I see are the trees.

Not all jumps are so close, but they are all thrills, which is why I spend every spare minute at college, every spare dime, sky diving. It's obsession. I can't look up to the sky without free-fall images flying through me. On every airplane I see, I look at where the door sits in relation to the wing in order to see if a sky diver can safely jump out of it. A breeze, a bird, even a blast of wind through an open car window fires my mind into fantastic fantasies of free fall. Every time I step out of a car, I think of stepping out of an airplane 7,500 feet up.

Every weekend, no matter what football game is at the college stadium or on television (Super Bowl included), Tenaflly and I, usually in my little green Fiat convertible, drive over fifty miles to Palatka, a redneck cow town east of Gainesville, to throw ourselves out of an airplane three to five times a day. It doesn't matter what tests we have Monday, or that we might be able to afford nothing but jelly sandwiches and Coca-Cola the next week—when Saturday comes, and the weather deities are assuaged, we sky dive. At times, we skip class and boogey during the week. We even jump at night. Sky diving does that to you. We're free-fall junkies.

As a ten-year-old, I had asked my dad if he would give me permission to sky dive when I turned seventeen. Thinking I'd eventually forget about it, he said yes, and then shuddered seven years later when I handed him the form to sign. Not one to renege on his word, he signed it,

and during my senior year at Miami Beach High School (without my mother's knowledge), I jumped.

Sky diving redeemed me. Skinny, half-blind, and slow of reflexes, as a kid I used to cringe, almost in tears because I was the last one picked whenever we played football or baseball. By sky diving, however, I showed up all the dirty skunks, none of whom had the guts to jump once, much less weekend after weekend. I no longer cared about being picked last because I knew that when the weekend came, these nerds would be playing tennis or swimming or something so terribly exciting like that while I was hurling myself out of an airplane almost two miles up.

Unfortunately, I am not much better at sky diving than at other sports. At seventeen, on my last student jump, I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing, and I accidentally pulled the reserve ripcord instead of the main ripcord (the reserve, on this rig, sat on my belly). The force, so sudden and unexpected, tore the seams out of the harness and jerked me so hard, the back of my head felt as if it had slammed into my heels. Stunned by the opening shock, I drifted for about half a mile, forgetting to steer the parachute. My back was never the same again. About a year later, attempting to downwind my canopy into the pea gravel, I dislocated my shoulder and broke my arm (my head made it into the gravel, the rest missed).

When I move to Gainesville at twenty-one and jump at Palatka, I continue to mess up, taking ten times as long to learn as does everyone else. When I jump, people stop what they are doing and look up into the sky because they are never sure what will happen to me next. They aren't surprised when I cut away. They are surprised that I survive.

"I thought you were going to bounce," Gary tells me after we get on the ground. "I turned around because I didn't want to look."

After that last jump, when I cut away from my main, I sell my parachute and buy a square canopy. Shaped like an airplane wing, this parachute is made for precision.

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Anyone, after five jumps, could put it down in the pea gravel so softly you could practically land on an egg and not break it. Me, after twenty jumps, I'm still crashing and burning into the trees, the runway—everywhere except where I want to land.

For a while, Tenaflly (Larry Feldman, my roommate) and I bring a girl, Donna, out to jump. When her father, a former Tulane football player and now dean of the University of Florida Business School, asks if she jumps, she denies it. One weekend when Tenaflly is out of town, we drive out. As a student, she jumps out of the plane at about 3,000 feet, while the rest of us go to 7,500. We jump, my square opens, filling the sky over my head with a rainbow of bright colors. But I crash and burn, as usual—only this time I hurt my knee. I lie on the ground, gasping in pain, my knee clasped in my hands. After two minutes, the pain subsides, I rise, scoop up my parachute, and limp back. As I cross the runaway, someone approaches me and says, "Donna is hurt."

Oh, man. Here comes trouble.

I find her lying in a van, blood over her head and a broken bone in her leg. We drive to the hospital, where the doctor bandages the head and plasters the leg. We bring her back to the drop zone and put Donna in her orange Datsun 240-Z. I am the one who has to take her home. I stop at my apartment and ask Sam, one of my roommates, to follow in my car so I can get back. Plus, Sam is a big, hearty basketball player, and I feel better having him with me because I don't have to be a University of Florida graduate to guess how Dean Lanziloti will react. We drive up to his mansion on a hill and park in the driveway, next to Daddy's Mercedes Benz. With me holding her legs, Sam holding her shoulders, we carry her like a sack of potatoes around to the back of the house, alongside the pool and into a basement den. We plop her, head bandaged, leg plastered, on the sofa. Just when it looks like we will escape, Donna asks, "Cliff, will you please get my purse out of the car?"

That request bodes ill. We run out, and Sam gets in the car. "I'm not going back. You take it." I grab the purse, run back, and hand it to her just as Daddy ex-football player walks in, looking as one might expect he would from the shock of first seeing his only daughter bandaged and in a full legcast from a sky-diving accident when she denied jumping.

"Are you the one," he snaps, "taking my daughter out there to sky dive?"

I shrug, look him in the eye, and lie, "I told her not to jump."

When he turns from me and starts yelling at her, I use that moment to exit out of the house faster than I ever exited out an airplane door.

My knee, meanwhile, is never the same. I tore cartilage, and repeatedly my knee gives out. More than once I hobble around for a week or two on crutches, only to wrap my knee in an ace bandage and head for the sky. I knew a guy who jumped with a broken leg, cast and all. We want to boogey so bad that we take our injuries in the air. Sky diving does that to you.

By my senior year at college, Tena fly graduates and moves away to sell IBM computers and sky dive in Texas. I rent an apartment by myself because the others can't stand living with my sloppy habits. Meanwhile, Harold and John take off in the big airplane, a Lockheed Lodestar, and never return. Weeks drag into months, and the first question everyone asks when they drive onto the drop zone is, "Where are Harold and John?" Their wives, their children, say they don't know, and we believe them.

Harold's teenage son, meanwhile, takes over, and everything falls apart. We can't find a pilot who knows how to fly sky divers (one pilot actually ran the airplane into the shed), and the drop zone loses money fast. People drink on the ground while others are still jumping, something we never did before. We also have numerous "safety meetings" when, before each jump, we smoke pot and get "safe." After one safety meeting, we jump, and my square opens.

I fly calmly, aiming my canopy for the peas. I have over 200 jumps now, and have finally learned to land where I want—and softly too. It's late, the air is cool, and I glide earthward, relaxed and enjoying my buzz. I reach the peas, flare the canopy, and drop as softly as a swan landing in a park lake.

I collapse in pain. The slightest pressure at the wrong angle wreaks havoc on my knee. Because I came in so slowly and landed in the soft peas, I was so relaxed that I touched at a bad angle. Never has my knee hurt so badly. I lie three minutes stunned, tears in my eyes. I force myself up, limp back, throw my rig in the car. I drive to the hospital and leave hours later with my knee wrapped tight. It hurts even to walk, much less sky dive.

This injury happens two weeks before I graduate. After my last class, I pack up my convertible and, with all my possessions, drive back to Miami Beach, two crutches sticking in the air—a symbol that, at least for now, my wings are clipped.

Chapter 3

Obsession

For the eight months that I have been writing my novel, I hover between two worlds: the one in which I live and the one that lives in me, a flurry of images and ideas that flutter through my mind like butterflies. Yet after eight months, I reach the part in the novel where I should have started it to begin with. For days I struggle in my room at college. Then I trash the manuscript, sit down, and put a blank sheet in the typewriter. I push away the pain, knowing that not a word is wasted when I write, for I never finish a sentence without learning more than when I started it. I take a deep breath, place my fingers on the keys, and, as new images and scenes flash behind my eyes, I pound away.

As I write, I indulge a passion burning so hot that my desire for truth and my addiction to free fall pale in comparison. From the time I knew how to read, I wanted to write, and whether in cafes in Iceland, hotels in Russia, or beaches in Portugal—wherever I was, I wrote frantically, incessantly, seriously. Generations of writers are wired in me, and whatever inspired them wires through me too.

This insanity rages inside. Family, friends, school all stand on the periphery, hovering on the outer fringes of

my existence—while at the center, against which everything else is measured, is a seething obsession with writing fiction, a personal version of whatever madness drives men to sell their souls carving statues out of stone or brushing colors across canvas.

Since childhood, I have inhabited two worlds—one real, one imaginary; one that controlled me, and one that I controlled. My earliest memories are fantasies, images less substantive than shadow, yet so real that even today they float more vividly in my memory than does the tangible reality that had surrounded me.

My whimsical world revolved around a handful of toy soldiers. I would pick them up and, magically, they would vanish, replaced with full-color fantasies that reeled through my mind like movies. Anyone looking saw only a skinny kid with glasses and a butch cut sitting on the floor making noises, faces, shouting, grimacing, talking to himself as he played with toy soldiers. But I was immersed in a world of spies, mysteries, and war. Creating a cast of characters involved in complex plots, I planned each step, calculating each scene so that the story would be as intelligent and as close to reality as possible. I created a world for myself, a world limited only by the intangible bounds of a child's imagination. Of course, reality would rudely intrude, but I would snap out of it and quickly reenter a world that lived in my head, an endless kaleidoscope of ideas, images, and faces that blotted out everything else around me.

At eleven or twelve, I still had the soldiers, still wove detailed, complex stories which I knew were more intelligent, logical, and believable than the nonsense bantered on television. I would look at those shows and think, *I can make up a story better than that*, and would. Yet, no matter how intelligent and planned my plots were—I was still a twelve-year-old boy sitting on the floor making faces, noises, and talking to himself. It embarrassed my older sister Joyce that at this age I was still playing with toy soldiers.

"What kind of fraternity do you think you'll get into playing with plastic men?" she snapped.

Fraternities?

Soon, though, it embarrassed me, too, and I threw the soldiers in the brown paper garbage bag that sat in the kitchen. Yet the fantasy continued, channeled into other realms. I read novels, sometimes two a day, always preferring to tackle a book than reality. Our house was wall-to-wall books, each one a new challenge, a new opportunity to unleash my imagination. Just as with the soldiers, the words would disappear, and the scenes created by the writers played out before me. I read hundreds of novels, great ones, terrible ones, and some images still surface in my mind today. And then it struck me. *I can do this, even better.*

I hated math, flunked French from a teacher at Miami Beach High, and bombed out of chemistry the first week. But in English I flourished. I especially loved to write short stories. I would sit for hours, creating with words the images that flashed through my mind as if it were crammed with artists painting frescoes on its walls. I still made noises, faces, still talked to myself, as when I had played as a child—only now in my fingers, instead of plastic soldiers, were pens, pencils, or typewriter keys.

At eighteen, while working as a copyboy in the newsroom of the *Miami Herald*, I wrote a story about scuba diving in the Florida Keys. I had the audacity to give it to the editor of *Tropic*, the paper's Sunday magazine, who was surprised that this skinny, shaggy-haired copyboy who wandered around the newsroom in a daze would have the gumption to think he could write an article for *his* magazine. Six long months later, after I assumed that the article was trashed, lost, or forgotten, I saw the editor in the elevator, and he said, "We are buying your article."

"Oh, really. That's nice. Thank you."

I left the elevator and, in the parking lot beneath the building, jumped and screamed. A few months later I gave

him another article, about turkey hunting in South Florida, and he bought that one too.

About a year later, hibernating in Sweden for a winter, I wrote in my diary that the only thing, the *only* thing I wanted to do with my life is write fiction. From that moment everything I did was planned in relation only to pursuing this goal.

When I returned from Sweden, I moved to Gainesville, to finish my last two years of college (I did the first two in Miami, while I worked at the newspaper). I majored in English, and the only classes I worked hard in were the ones in which I wrote fiction (when I wasn't sky diving at Palatka with Tenaflly). Sitting on the second floor of the library, I scribbled out a short story about a man in a mental institution who believes that he is crazy until he learns that the shrink who declared him insane committed suicide. *Who's the crazy one?* he thinks. I wrote about a draft dodger living in Sweden who befriends a blind boy. One story I based on the time when, as a teenager traveling on a boat from Finland to Sweden, I got in a drunken brawl with waiters in a discothèque and was thrown in the brig for the night.

Walking across the campus one morning, I read in the *Alligator* about a student killed by a cop who caught him picking psilocybin mushrooms in a local cow pasture. Because mushroom picking, like tennis, was a common practice at the university, the school was outraged, especially because a rumor ruffling the air was that the student was handcuffed when shot.

My mind, meanwhile, ran amuck with story ideas. I couldn't sleep as I wove the shooting into a plot. Then it hit me: *Write a novel! That's what you've been wanting to do all along!* The prospect of unleashing as never before the creative madness that brewed inside me raised my pulse faster than a capsule of speed. Within days I started hammering away on a novel that I knew would consume me for years.

From that initial incident, the shooting, I created a story

about a seventeen-year-old boy, a runaway, who travels through Europe with a seven-year-old girl who has a blond frizzy Afro and a black eye. At first, I imagined that the story was about rebellion against the establishment—the usual stuff of the seventies. But after a few months I realized that this novel was really about me, about families and family relations. I had no visions of it becoming a great social statement, or the voice of a generation. At twenty-one years of age, I knew that anything I said would have already been said. I simply wanted to say it beautifully.

After eight months of frantic typing, I reach the point where Rufus and Katie, the main characters, leave for Europe. Yet *here* is where the novel should have started. The killing, the events before it and immediately after, everything, should all be summary. The plot, the action itself, must commence with them going overseas together.

I struggle at my desk. While my friends are getting degrees in business, marketing, or law, and are interviewing for jobs and planning careers, I write. I have staked my life on this book. Everything I am, everything I have, is poured into the novel, as if the pages themselves suck life from my veins. The only way I can write is to squeeze myself dry. I can't compromise. If I believed that I was going to become just another good writer, I wouldn't waste my time. Thousands of good writers already exist. But I am striving for immortality, for greatness, and therefore I must put my whole life into my craft. Anything less seems like a frustrating waste of time. For this book to be the best that I can make it, those pages have to go. Knowing that I am making the right decision, no matter how painful, I trash the book, keeping only a few pages that I can later use.

Because one of the main characters is a child, I volunteer a few hours a week at an elementary school so I can listen to children talk, watch them play, and understand how they think—all to better create Katie, the seven-year-old in my book. My time is well spent, especially when I sit on the swings with a little girl, and she says things like,

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"Boy, I wish I had twenty dollars I could buy a jillion pieces of bubble gum!"

The other main character, Rufus, is a juvenile delinquent, so I volunteer at a home for juvenile delinquents. Here, too, I listen, watch, take mental notes. One boy with greasy hair down to his shoulders describes what it's like to steal a car, which Rufus does.

"At first," the boy says, "you are in this car, and you know that it is stolen. But after a while, the more you drive, the less and less it feels like you stole it and the more it feels like it is yours, your own car!" *Great stuff!*

For endless hours I sit in the corner of my room and hammer on the typewriter. I feel the exact creative process grinding out when I write as when I played with my soldiers. I am exhilarated as ideas and images that I never knew existed in me stream out onto the paper. As I write, my imagination is converted into language—and words are nearer to reality than are the misty images that drifted through my head as a child. Unlike my childhood fantasies, which vanished into the air when I finished playing, with this book I have something tangible in my hands after all the madness in my mind.

Pounding away on the novel through my senior year, I hold my grades at an acceptable level though I care little about college. Outside of poetry classes, which teach me everything I know about language, school, even the creative writing classes, helps me little. I learn by sitting in my room and struggling over every word, every sentence, every page.

I graduate in 1978. On my last day in Gainesville, I load the Fiat, return the key to the landlord, and drive away, my mind floating in images and ideas, the unfinished manuscript sitting safely next to me on the front seat beside my crutches. At twenty-two, I am obsessively clear about the direction of the rest of my life. I will write novels.

Nothing else matters.

Chapter 4

Wanderings

The hotels and motels of Miami Beach sit like an abandoned mountain range, its peaks (hotels) and valleys (motels) stretching into a thin strip of faded neon and cracked cement that extends along miles of shore. The beach itself has been eroding for years, each polluted wave snatching a handful of sand and washing it out to sea until hotels literally feel the Atlantic pounding at their back doors. Dredging miles of ocean floor in an attempt to push back the sea, the city fathers spend millions reclaiming from the water that which was stolen from them, that which used to draw endless flocks of dollars from the icy North. It's too late. Miami Beach has been dying for decades, its mammoth hotels—once bustling with the reckless abandon of tourists—rot like dinosaur carcasses, sea breezes whistling through empty halls, ocean spray sprinkling faceless windows, sea gulls hovering like flies over hollow frames. Who comes to Miami Beach anymore, except old folks whose wrinkles fill with sunlight as they vegetate on their balconies waiting to die?

At the north entrance to Miami Beach, my Fiat struggles over Haulover Bridge, the bridge I jumped off as a kid. The car glides down Collins Avenue, which on bright mornings

is covered in shadows cast by the beach-front hotels—shadows that by evening flutter and shake on the waves before vanishing with the sun. Here, in the lobbies, pools, or cabanas of these hotels, the Americana, the Deauville, the Fountainbleu—I grew up, painfully stretching from a child into a man. Ballrooms, lobbies, banquets, and bars—this is the stuff I am made of. Well-read as I was, not until I turned seventeen and made my first trip overseas did I realize that most of the world wasn't an endless march of bars, nightclubs, and hotels.

After a dozen traffic lights, I turn down 91st Street and drive a few blocks until I stop in front of our house in the quiet, well-manicured, upper-middle-class neighborhood of Surfside. Every time I come home, our single-story cement house, white with black trim, shrinks. Only the green leafy tree in the front yard, once shorter than I was, gets bigger, now casting shadows across the roof. Our black cat of eleven years, Christie, lazily moves down the sidewalk toward my car. She shows no recognition or interest as I get out, and turns away. I lift the manuscript, throw the parachute over my shoulder, grab a box of philosophy books, and limp in. I return for the crutches and clothes. I'm home.

I seek old friends. Ray is dead. Barbara is dead. Jody is dead. Cindy is dead. The drug toll. Others managed to survive, even thrive: George is an airline pilot, Stuart a neurologist, David an engineer. But they have escaped. The only ones remaining, above ground at least, are those who, with this city, decay. Mark nurses his wounds from a police bullet. Ralph and David sit in jail. Bob wallows in homosexuality and dope. Dawn overdoses, her guts sucked out to save her so she can try again. Tommy struggles with methadone. Drugs have stormed through my generation like a hurricane. We've all been battered. Only the strongest survive.

My two sisters, Joyce the oldest of the kids, Shelley the youngest, have moved away to other cities, and my parents have recently divorced (my dad, a math professor,

living in south Miami), so my mother and grandmother live alone in the house. I have plenty of space, and each day I sit in the Florida room, and as cool ocean breezes flow between panes of plate glass, I work on my novel. Before me stand bookshelves stacked with the volumes that fascinated and inspired my youth, while at my feet is the floor where I sat creating fantasies that still linger like old dreams. Now, however, instead of reading those books, I write my own; instead of sprawling on the floor, I sit at a desk; and instead of soldiers in my hands, I finger typewriter keys. Otherwise, as far as the creative process is concerned, not much has changed.

Though I have a little money left from school, I need an income, and a B.A. in English makes me about as marketable as pig meat in Mecca. Through connections with my dad, I could teach English at a college, but the prospect of teaching semiliterate Miamians how to read is as uninspiring as is the thought of working on a master's degree in English, which I would have to do to keep the job. Of course, teaching does give you spare time. All Dad ever did, it seems, was take me deep-sea fishing and skin diving in our boat and riding on his motor scooter. But I don't want to teach, I don't want to study. I want to write my novel.

Because most of the story occurs in Europe, I decide to go there. "Research," I tell my grandmother, who isn't thrilled about having another starving artist in the family. Her son is a novelist, and though I idolize Uncle David, Grandma is upset because he doesn't make enough money. She wants me to teach at the college and study for my master's degree. I can't. This novel is like a caged animal inside me. I must let it out. *Sorry, Grandma, but I will go to Europe and write. You might not think it now, but when I become famous, you'll be so proud.* "Research," I tell her, "research for my novel."

I've been to Europe before. In my senior year at high school, chemistry was a futile endeavor, so I skipped the class and hung around the library, where I met a student

named Jimmy Kronsoble who had this great notion to go to Europe. Unlike chemistry formulas, which traveled by high-speed osmosis from one ear and out the other, Jimmy's idea stopped like a brick in my head. My parents, very open and liberal, agreed if I could fund the trip, which I could because I worked as a car runner at hotels and restaurants along Miami Beach—an outrageous occupation for a reckless sixteen-year-old who wreaked havoc on automobiles. Cadillacs, Lincoln Continentals, Buicks, whatever—I would smash one, get fired, and then get hired at another hotel and repeat the process, either getting canned or quitting whenever I wanted a vacation. Dressed in black pants, a white shirt, and dirty sneakers, I worked at more than a dozen places, smashing other people's cars all the way from 163th Street down to South Beach.

After more than a year, I made enough money in tips (the fools actually tipped me!) and, lugging my red backpack, I flew to New York, where I met Jimmy (he had moved away in the meantime). We flew Air Icelandic to Europe and even went to North Africa together, but after about two weeks he got on my nerves, so I ditched him in a train station in Spain and never saw him again.

For the next six weeks, I wandered around Europe alone. I would wake up, having slept in parks, on beaches, in train stations, even a graveyard. Whichever way the wind blew, I went. I had no plans, no pressures, no commitments. My only goal: adventure and fun. I went where I wanted, ate what I wanted, stayed with whom I wanted. No teachers, parents, or bosses griping to me about skipping chemistry, cleaning my room, or wrecking a new Cadillac. I even sky-dived twice—once in France, once in England. At seventeen, I had no cares, responsibilities, or worries except for my own personal well-being and enjoyment. This life I could enjoy.

Indeed, I enjoyed it so much that as soon as I returned I began planning another trip to Europe, this time for a year. During my first two years at college in Miami, I worked full time at night as a copyboy for the Miami

Herald. I planned to save money, wander around Europe until broke, and then work in Sweden as a dishwasher (the only job I could get without papers)—which is exactly what I did. After traipsing through England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Germany, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, even Russia, I spent the winter in Sweden as a *diskare* in a downtown Stockholm restaurant called *Prince Hamlet*. I then traveled across Russia by airplane and the Trans-Siberian railroad, took a boat to Japan, and after two weeks of aimless rambling around Japan drinking coffee and eating raw fish, I flew back to the USA with barely a dime left. I got out of Sweden just in time, too, because a friend wrote me that soon after I left, the police came to the house looking to deport me as an illegal alien. I had been gone from the States almost a year.

And now, after two years, I plan to return. I stay in New York with my aunt and uncle. David Markson is a brilliant novelist, but his books are too intellectual to sell big. He won't compromise for anything, even food, which is the way I want to be: pushing the art to the extreme of my creative potential. Though I have no intention of even trying to write as intellectually as David, I want his command of language, for he is a master. His wife, meanwhile, is a successful literary agent. My writing friends can't believe that *Elaine Markson* is my aunt, a connection which I plan to take full advantage of when the time is right.

But first I need to produce a book, so the following evening I board a jet, and the next thing I know I am standing in the rain outside Gatwick Airport with my thumb in the air trying to get a lift into London so I can find a job and write. Hitchhiking can be so depressing, especially in the rain, when cars—warm, dry, going where you want to go—keep going, the only things stopping are exhaust fumes that prick your face.

Though I'm groggy from the long flight, my predicament suddenly hits me like a bad dose of drugs: in a foreign

country, I have almost no connections, not much money, and a stamp on my passport that forbids me to find employment in that country even though working was the whole reason that I came. I don't know where I will live, how I will find a job, or if anyone will hire me. I don't even know where I will sleep tonight. Plus, my feet are soaked, and I'm freezing.

Unlike my previous trips as a whimsical kid with a thick wad of money who wandered on whims and lusts, and whose biggest concern was how long his bottle of French wine would stay cool in his knapsack, I am no longer a carefree child but an adult. My wallet, instead of starting out fat, is thin from the start. And, instead of leisurely wandering from Paris to Geneva or whichever city I momentarily happen to fancy, I have to get settled so that I can write this novel, which weighs heavily upon me, as if I lug bricks in my backpack.

After reaching London, I dial a few numbers of people whom I hope will help me, if with nothing more than a place to sleep for the night, but that turns up zilch. I meet another fellow with a backpack, a Yugoslavian, and we hide out in Hyde Park, sleeping in the bushes next to English bums in suits and ties. *Only in England*, I think, *do the bums wear suits*.

In the morning the Yugoslavian leaves, and I walk into Victoria Station, where I see a priest, which reminds me that monasteries often take people in. Perhaps if I can work in a monastery, I can get room and board. Though not exactly the monastic type, I have to go somewhere, anywhere, so I can write, and what better place than the seclusion of a Catholic monastery?

I approach the priest, who tells me of a monastery near Oxford. I hitch there, and the monks give me overnight lodging and a meal, but no more. For the next two weeks I go from one monastery to another, seeking room and board for the winter, but getting it only for the night.

I arrive at a monastery on Tenby, a stony island off the coast of Wales. When I sit in the balcony of the chapel

during vespers, a procession of bald heads files in as the monks enter for the service, candlelight flickering across the walls. They agree to let me stay and work because they are old and need help. I have to be crazy to isolate myself in this place, I think, especially in winter, because the boat can't weather the seas, and the island is cut off for weeks from the mainland. But I know that not much will distract me from writing, and I decide to stay. Then, just as I get settled, the monks throw me out, telling me I have to leave on the boat immediately after breakfast.

"I'm sorry," says Father Joseph, a gentle old monk with brown teeth. "It's as much of a surprise to me as it is to you. But you have to leave today."

Within two hours I'm back on the mainland with my thumb in the air, pointing in any direction as long as it will get me out of the rain. I have no idea where I will sleep tonight, much less where I can work and write because I've run out of monasteries. Meanwhile, neither cars nor the rain stops, and I'm soaked and chilled. Finally, I just throw my arms up in the air. *I've had enough! I'm going back to Sweden and working there. Forget this monk weirdo stuff!*

Two soggy days later, I reach the east coast of England and catch a boat to Holland. From there I will hitch to Sweden. After the boat docks, I descend the gangplank, and ahead of me is a boy with a cardboard sign that says *Greece*. Instantly, the beaches, the sun, the cloudless skies of Greece all flash through my head, while in the sky above my head, on the ground before it, and in my sneakers beneath it—is nothing but rain.

"Are you thumbing to Greece?" I ask, catching up as we leave the ship.

"Yes," he says with a thick Irish accent. "Are you?"

"Yeah," I reply. "I'm going to Greece too. Do you want to hitch together, man?"

"Sounds good," he says. "Let's go."

Ten minutes later, instead of heading north to Sweden, I'm standing on the opposite side of the road with my

thumb pointed south. I will go to Athens, to a Greek boy that I met at the University of Florida who told me that he could get me a job there. Two sopped men with backpacks, however, don't usually get rides, and after hours of going almost nowhere I tell him that I want to split up.

"Hey, man," I say. "This is ridiculous. We will get there quicker walking. I'll see you in the sun."

I say goodbye and head down the road, leaving him behind, but not for long because five minutes later he drives by in a car and waves while raindrops speckle my glasses like a windshield without wipers. Eventually, police pick me up for illegal hitchhiking, put me in their green-and-white car, and drive along a secluded road. For a moment, I fear that they are going to beat me up. Instead, they let me off on a highway that heads toward Germany, where I want to go. A few minutes later a Dutchman in a Honda picks me up, his long legs, dressed in tight red corduroy pants, spread wide across the seats. *Oh, man, who needs this?* He propositions me, even offers to fly me to Greece with him and his boyfriends. I tell him thanks but no thanks, and he lets me off unmolested. By late afternoon, I reach the German border.

I try to catch a ride with truckers who stop at customs. A friendly German border guard asks each driver if he is heading toward "*Sud Deutschland*." Fifty truckers must have said no until one blond British trucker stops.

"Excuse me," I ask, looking him in the face (it's harder for them to refuse if you look into their eyes), "where are you heading?"

"Afghanistan."

"Hey, man, can I have a lift?"

He hesitates, then says, "Get in."

A few seconds later I sit in the warm, dry cab that should take me most of the way to Greece. For the first time in days I'm happy. Hitchhiking can make you into a manic-depressive: You can be so discouraged as the heartless cars leave you stranded, but then the next moment,

with a good ride, you soar on the heights of bliss. I'm soaring now.

That evening, at a truck stop, I am huddled among tables of men with beer bellies, tattoos, and unshaven jowls. Truckers intrigue me. Rowdy, earthy, they exude a sense of adventure and machismo that hovers around them like tobacco smoke. These men, definitely not intellectuals, have a different kind of smarts, a streetwise sophistication that comes from years of hassling with the road. An unspoken kinship exists among them, like a fraternity, and I feel protected, safe in their presence.

They tell great stories. The trucker who picked me up, a big blond with a thick beard, tells about how once he was driving in Afghanistan when a truck filled with Afghans heading the other way hit the back of his rig and flipped off a cliff, the bodies hurling through the air.

"I just kept going," he says. "The fewer of those bloody buggers, the better."

We go across Germany the first evening and all the next day, reaching the mountains of Austria, which encapsule us at night in a heavy, impenetrable blackness. The next morning we come to the Austrian-Yugoslavian border, and he stops among a mile of trucks parked along the road. The trucks might have to wait the whole day before being allowed to cross the border. This trucker would take me through much of Yugoslavia before turning to Bulgaria, but I decide to go on ahead. I say goodbye, grab my backpack, and walk across the border alone.

A number of hitchhikers stand just on the other side of customs, so I walk down the road, a main artery that cuts through the country. Yugoslavia, the long way, the way I need to go, is over 500 miles long. Unlike some of the highways in England, this road is simply two lanes, one heading north, one heading south. For three hot, thirsty days I plod ahead. I arrive in Thessalonika, in northern Greece, on the third evening. An earthquake had leveled part of the town a week before, and I roll out my sleeping bag among tents pitched in parks for the homeless. By late

afternoon the next day, I'm sitting in the back of a green truck nearing Athens. The truck's canvas is removed, and the metal bars over the top sit exposed like bones. As we wind down these beautiful hills, I swing on the bars, even hanging upside down by my feet. Holland to Athens in under six days, all free! Soon I will see my friend Fanis and have a good place to sleep, company, and prospects for a job.

When we enter the city, the driver, a policeman with a few fingers missing from his left hand, gives me subway directions for the address I show him. I take subways and buses, almost getting lost in this dizzying city. It's after dark, I am exhausted, hungry, and tempted to simply find a park and sleep, waiting until tomorrow to find Fanis. Finally, I come to a dark street off a busy intersection. I squint to read the numbers. I reach his house, an apartment building, and knock. A heavy old woman with a white scarf on her black hair opens the door.

"Is Fanis here?" I ask. "Fanis, please."

"Fanis no here," she answers. "Fanis in Miami."

"Miami?" I whine. "*Miami?*"

Oh, lady, please, please, please don't tell me that!

Sensing my despair, she lets me into the small apartment and feeds me. As I eat, she points proudly to Fanis's diplomas from Miami-Dade Community College and from the University of Florida that hang on her wall. I feign interest, but at that moment I am more concerned about where I will sleep tonight and what I will do for the rest of my life. I hope she will let me spend the night, but she doesn't offer, and an hour later I am on the streets in a strange city without an idea of where I am going and what I am doing.

Around the corner, just off the bellowing intersection, I find a plot of bushes next to a wall. I climb in, unroll my sleeping bag, and lie down. I instantly melt into the ground, the noises of the street fading in and out until I'm asleep. Then, as I sleep, I dream that the next day, after I awake, I fly to Israel to live on a kibbutz and resume my

novel where I had left off in Miami Beach.

When I awake that morning, I walk across the street to a travel agent. While the last images of the dream still float in my blood, I book a flight to Israel. That evening I walk out of Ben Gurion airport, and two days later I'm on a kibbutz where I finish writing the sentence that I began in Miami Beach over three weeks ago—just like the dream!

Chapter 5

Kibbutz Gadot

Sometimes, when I work the fields, explosions draw my eyes from the dirt. A few hundred yards away, summer brush fires ignite land mines in the hills of the Golan. No more Syrians patrol the Golan Heights, no more of their artillery pieces pound the Jews in the plain below. Only their mines remain. A week before I arrive, one blows off the leg of an Israeli soldier.

Welcome to Kibbutz Gadot.

Actually, except for the land mines and an occasional Soviet-built rocket landing in a nearby town, it's peaceful on the kibbutz, which rests on the north edge of a lush valley in Galilee along the Jordan River. To the south, purple-and-blue hills roll into the horizon like silent waves. To the north and west, in the plain on which Gadot sits, vast fields quietly squeeze an abundance of life out of the earth. On summer days the sky burns fierce blue, the air is crisp, and cool breezes wheeze down from the Golan.

I eat in the communal dining room, so I don't have to cook, or clean dishes. My clothes are washed for me too. Because I work only thirty-six hours a week, all other hours are mine, and I spend most of them absorbed, writ-

ing the book in my room, a small square box with white pictureless walls, a wood floor, and two beds. Sometimes I walk in the hills of the Golan, in areas where the mines have been cleared. I sit in the shade, the fields stretched out before me like a soft dream, and read poetry books. Often, I read out loud so only the birds can hear.

Working with dirt in the morning, then with words for the rest of the day, I feel complete, balanced, satisfied as never before. I wish that just a quick bus ride away stood a city brimming with bars, restaurants, and noisy crowds. Otherwise, everything is perfect.

Then, to disrupt my utopia, a group of ten religious Christians from the States comes for a year. Here I am, in the boonies of the only Jewish state since the Bar Kokba rebellion in A.D. 135, and who arrives but American Christians with all their Jesus stuff. *Jesus*. I can't even say the name without gagging. These Christians are the same conservative species as Smock—the kind that I have harassed for years, and I don't waste time before zeroing in. Though not as rude as with Smock, I insult them, their beliefs, their faith, my loud dirty mouth even making the women cry. But mostly, I embarrass them in front of other Jews.

"Do you see that old Jew there?" I ask one day in the cafeteria, pointing to an elderly man at another table. "Will that old man—who probably had his whole family gassed at Auschwitz—burn in hell because he doesn't accept your Jesus? Remember, you're Christians, so you can't lie now. Will he burn? Tell the rest of us Jews here so we can know what to expect in case more of you Christians kill us."

In a tense, embarrassed silence, they say nothing.

Nevertheless, I am drawn to these people, fascinated by what they believe, what they have experienced, as if some magnetic force pulls me to them. I still want to know the truth about the existence and purpose of life. Not that I believe these dupes have it; I don't. But I am interested in whatever they do have, even if I cloak my curiosity under a barrage of blasphemy that must make me seem like a

hopeless reprobate doomed to eternity in the lake of fire.

Yet even if that's where they think I'm going, they never say so. Despite my acrimony, they never retaliate, complain, or condemn. Instead, they love me.

"You make it hard for me to love you, Cliff," says Sue Norris, an older Texan woman who cringes as my foul language spikes her ears, "but I love you anyway."

And what their attitude shows me is that I can't continually blame all Christians for the Jewish blood spilled by the church. However misguided their religion is, these people would never hurt a Jew because he was a Jew. If anything, they seem to love Jews simply because we are Jews. Though I have a thousand reasons for rejecting their Jesus, I can no longer honestly use past persecutions of the Jews as one, not when there are Christians like these around.

My public bickering with them rankles the Israelis on the kibbutz, many of whom see me as a troublemaker and who are looking for an excuse to kick me out. They find one: either I leave those people alone or leave. I back off, spending time with other volunteers instead, part of the continuous flux of personalities, cultures, and characters that converge here from all over the world. Every lost soul wandering the planet winds up picking grapefruits or washing dishes on some kibbutz in Israel. The French talk, smoke, drink, do everything but work. The Australians, hardy, earthy, reliable, work hard. Methodical, disciplined, the Germans are frighteningly smart. The Danes appear quiet, reserved, until they down a few drinks—then they cut loose. The Finns, all they do is drink themselves sick. Unquestionably, the most unstable, erratic, and hysterical volunteers are the Americans, who (except for the Christians) are either attempting suicide, getting busted for drugs, or having nervous breakdowns. Eventually, the kibbutz stops taking American groups.

I room for a while with a Swiss man who speaks only French. Writing a pornographic novel, he is obsessed with women, and has me translate letters from French to

English to all the femmes of his fantasies. I later befriend a Dutch boy, Seeger, a creative madman like myself, and we sit around for hours talking films, art, literature. We get along well, perhaps because we both live in our own frantic little fantasy worlds, caring only about our artistic endeavors and passions. For a while I room with a French draft deserter whom I come close to punching out, and later I befriend an English boy who sits in his room all day and smokes hash. I even find a girlfriend—a blond Dane named Tine.

A few Americans live here, not as temporary volunteers but as long-term inhabitants. Victor is a middle-aged American Jew who had gone to Beverly Hills High School. Jack, having weaseled out of Vietnam by joining the merchant marine, was drafted into the Israeli military instead. While on duty, he lets me live in his house, which—with its heated waterbed, private bath and kitchen—is luxurious compared to the barren volunteer quarters. Jimmy, an intellectual with a graduate degree in Latin American studies, couldn't find work in his field, so he lives here instead. They are the only American kibbutzniks, and I become friends with them all.

But what consumes most of my time and attention is not flesh and blood but paper and ink. What I do most feverishly, intensely, and consistently is write. I spend more time with imaginary people than with those who are real. It doesn't matter if I'm shelving vegetables in the freezer, or trimming bushes, whatever—all people have to do is look at me, even from a distance, to see that I'm in another dimension.

In the book itself, Rufus had run away with Katie because her brother (who had been killed by the police for picking mushrooms) had told Rufus that her father was sexually abusing her. Though he believed that he had taken her away to protect Katie from her dad, Rufus soon realizes that this was just his excuse to run away from home.

The story centers on their relationship, on how the bar-

riers slowly break down and these two kids form a bond closer than they ever had with their own families. When Rufus and Katie start out in Europe, Katie spits on him, curses him, and screams that she wants to go home. When they get to Paris, he buys her a dozen colorful helium-filled balloons to keep her from screaming, spitting, and cursing (he already bought her a pogo stick, three dolls, and candy, all for the same reason). As she and Rufus sit on a bench along the Seine, Katie asks if her dead mother is in heaven. When Rufus says yes, she opens her hands, and the balloons squirm into the sky, a present for her mother. At first, Rufus wants to yell; instead, he hugs her, tears dripping down their cheeks. The bonding begins.

As I write, I sometimes catch myself pressing the pen into the paper as if I were gouging the words out with a knife. I can spend excruciating hours on just one sentence, refusing to begin the next until the first turns out as perfect as I can make it. It's obsession. I can't imagine writing any other way. I can feel myself improving as a writer too. As the months progress, I see writing as nothing but a relationship—semantic, phonetic, and metric—between words, and understanding these relationships is the key to mastering the art. I love language, sounds, images, and the book allows me to spend years creating them.

Because of my passion for words, whatever fraction of me that isn't consumed by the novel is possessed by poetry. I don't have the intensity, the insanity, the microscopic nearness to the language to write poetry, but I am an addict who devours verse with the fervency of a drunk and his drink. I can read a poem three, four times and get nothing from it, as if it were gibberish hammered out by an illiterate. But, sometimes, I read it again, and the words, images, allusions all fall into place, and I experience every emotion, thought, and pain that the poet felt as he wrote the poem. Then, as frantically as the experience began, it ends. As soon as I finish the poem, it

loses its power, and I can read it again and again, but it's like trying to get one more drink out of an empty bottle.

I've converted, from philosopher-worship to poet-worship. Verse is my faith, poetry my scripture, and poets the divine beings who create worlds that I fleetingly inhabit. *They write, and it is so.* On the bookshelf over my bed sits my stash of poetry books, a sacred collection. One poet has taken me through the coldest holes of her soul. Sylvia Plath, she is the goddess of anguish, and as I eat her flesh and drink her blood—I am shattered. In one piece, she carries me with her to the edge: She wrote the poem—then put her head in an oven and gassed herself.

In the midst of this madness, a new face appears, soft, white, with a light beard and thinning hair. Levy joins the Christian group. Levy is a Jew.

"You traitor," I snarl. The only thing more repulsive to me than a Christian is a Jew who becomes one. These apostates hate their Jewishness, and baptism is their attempt to wash it away. I'm surprised that they don't have an operation to undo their circumcision too.

Yet to say that Levy hates his Judaism doesn't quite fit the situation. His real name is Lance, which he Hebraized into Levy, and he moved from America to Israel, where he wants to settle. Somehow, these factors don't add up to a person wanting to rewire his genes in order to root out his Jewish past.

Levy is different. First, he is intelligent. For me, intelligence and Christianity are mutually exclusive. How could any thinking person take those camel-herder myths seriously? I usually wrote off these people as ex-acid freaks or something. Yet Levy is too down to earth, rational, and intellectual to be dismissed as some ex-druggie who never flushed all the acid out of his blood.

I see other Christians as those who could never shake off the fairy tales programmed into them as kids by red-neck preachers in Sunday School. Yet Levy was not raised Christian. He accepted his faith as an adult.

I view religious people as weak, afraid of loneliness and

death, so they conjure up some mystical relationship with Jesus, as if He were a big, invisible bunny rabbit who comes to their rescue whenever they have a crisis. Yet none of these weaknesses appear in Levy. Instead, I see a secure, stable adult who has carefully, methodically thought out his positions, and whenever I question his faith, his answers are always so plain, simple, even at times so sensible that I am lost for a response.

So, instead of responding, I carry his answers back to Jimmy and Victor, who don't even believe in the God of the Hebrew Bible, much less in Jesus. They laugh off these people as kooks, and until I met Levy I did the same. But I can't dismiss him that easily. Once in a while, after Levy fills me with his logic, I look up in the sky and muse, *Maybe there really is some big daddy up there after all.* But then, after a few minutes with Jimmy, who neutralizes everything that Levy says, I dismiss Levy's God as a hoax. Then I carry Jimmy's arguments back to Levy, who unravels them, and I take his reply back to Jimmy and so on in an endless theological volley that has me playing devil's advocate with everyone.

No one thinks I'm serious about this religion stuff, least of all me. But it is fun, I like to antagonize both sides, and I do have questions. Jimmy, the ultimate cynic, eventually confirms what I have believed all along.

"It's all an illusion," he says, and though I agree with my head, something in my gut isn't satisfied.

One night at Gadot, we celebrate Purim with a wild costume party. Anything goes that night, and it does. The next morning as I walk to breakfast, I see Levy on the sidewalk outside the cafeteria.

"Why," I ask, "didn't you Christians go to the party?"

"We prayed to the Lord all week," he matter-of-factly answers, "and He told us to stay away."

God told them to stay away? I just can't write Levy off as a holy-rolling screwball or some schizophrenic mental case hearing voices. I don't believe that God told them to stay away from the party. Ridiculous! But the guy is not a

nut. He's rational, smart, down to earth. What did he hear? Either God spoke to them, and these people are tapped into the most fascinating and exciting and *important* phenomena a human could ever experience, or He didn't, and they are fruitcakes. I just wish that I knew once and for all.

I want truth. Even if it means that I must cross over the Jordan River and ride around on a camel and shout praises to Allah five times daily, I want truth. If it's Buddha, Marx, or Bastet the cat-goddess of ancient Egypt, I want to know. I wish these Christians would disappear and leave me alone. Sometimes Levy makes me feel like banging my head against the wall.

One afternoon, I'm riding across the desert to Jerusalem on a rickety red bus, when a Hasidic Jew dressed in black sits next to me. I've always been mystified, even frightened, by Hasidim. The same blood flows through our veins; some even have the same last name as I do. If you cut off their beards, took away their black coats and hats, and dressed them in jeans and dirty T-shirts, many would probably look like me. Yet I feel alienated, distant, as if we came from different planets. I have never even talked to one before. Awed, I initiate a conversation, but with a question as dumb as asking the pope if he's Catholic.

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes," he says with a deep accent. "I believe in God."

Realizing how stupid this question is, I reframe it.

"Why? What makes you believe?"

"Because," he answers softly, looking out the window, "I can feel Him."

I look out the window too. White rocky hills bristle in the Judean sun, but I don't feel God. I don't feel anything, except the battered bus vibrating and hot air blowing in my face.

"How can you believe in God," I ask, "after the Holocaust, after a million Jewish children were murdered?"

When I look in the sky, any vision of God I might have is clouded over by the smoke spewed out of Nazi ovens.

Any time I think that maybe God exists, that possibility is consumed by the same flames that consumed the tender flesh of trainloads of Jewish children. Where was God when those crying children were torn from their mothers' arms? Where was this Jesus as they were hurled into pits of fire? Where was the Messiah when Jewish babies' bones were crushed under black SS boots? If the Messiah were ever going to come, He should have showed up at Auschwitz. He didn't come then, so who needs Him now? For me, God, even the idea of God, is the final victim of the Holocaust.

I'm in a cafe in Copenhagen on my second trip to Europe. An old Jewish couple from Poland sit across from me. The old man, with huge hands and thick waves of white hair, recognizes me as a Jew. He speaks to me in Yiddish. I don't understand. He rolls up his sleeve and points to a tattoo. It doesn't say Mother. I can see how callously the numbers were carved in his skin, as if branded into a cow.

"Auschwitz," he says.

I understand now. I want to touch, to feel them for myself, but don't.

Numbers are tattooed on my soul

"My mother," the Hasidic Jew says, "spent three years in Auschwitz. Her whole family was killed, brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, all of them. She never lost her faith. On Shabbat she refused to use electricity. The Germans showed her respect. She told me that, as she saw what was happening, she knew that there had to be a God."

This man's mother, who suffered three years in Auschwitz, still believes in God when I, who never even visited the place, can't believe in God because of it? None of this religion stuff makes sense to me. I ought to forget it all.

Yet I can't, not completely. I am constantly confronted with religion simply because of the Christians. Their very existence rebukes me. Without saying a word, their presence tells me that they believe they have the absolute that I have been seeking, and that my beliefs and lifestyle

are wrong. Though I immerse myself in writing and reading, questions about God storm through my mind, and I'm always talking religion, philosophy, and God to everyone who will listen. Seeking answers, I read everything from *The Confessions of Rousseau* to *Mere Christianity* to Henry Miller's *Sexus*, *Nexus*, and *Plexus*. I read books about Judaism and Jewish history. Half joking, I once tell Jack that I have been thinking about becoming an Orthodox Jew.

"You become an Orthodox Jew," Jack says, "and I'll never speak to you again."

A new face joins the Christian group, an American Jew named Asher. With his black curly hair and beard, he looks like a rabbi. When we first meet, I am chopping bushes with a machete. Unlike Levy, who never talks religion unless I bring it up, Asher starts in preaching this Jesus stuff right away. I whack the bushes harder and harder until I have visions of stabbing him in the chest. Over the months we bicker constantly, and at times I become so bitter that I want to tear this *meshumad's* beard out of his face.

One afternoon, I talk with Asher after he has been unjustly kicked out of his job in the kitchen. I see that he is hurt.

"I'm just glad that it happened to you and not to me," I say. "What do you think you'll do about it?"

"Nothing," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "I forgive them; I forgive them all."

He forgives them!

Asher and I have argued about God for months. If anything, he has turned me off to religion. Yet those three words, "I forgive them," are the most powerful argument he has ever used to prove that he has something that I don't have but want. Struggling inside, I walk away.

The months roll by. Winter is wet, nasty, and I sit in Jack's house and hammer out the novel while a little vibrating oil heater makes the room smell like a garage. The novel progresses slowly but steadily. I draw Rufus and

Katie closer together, keeping the phases of their relationship as the main focus of the novel. Meanwhile, as much as I can, I bury religious and philosophical questions because it's fruitlessly frustrating. Also, I know that if I ever get serious with religion, any religion, I will go all the way, and the only thing I want to go all the way with is my book. There's not room for both.

One afternoon, I am talking to a Christian named John, a big blond Canadian, looks like a lumberjack, who tells me about Bible prophecy and its fulfillment.

"Only a dingbat," I say, "would fall for this nonsense."

That same day, at Jimmy's house, I say to him: "But what Bible prophecy? Have you even seen the way that the Bible prophets in the Old Testament predict the future?"

"Here," Jimmy says, handing me a book. "Read this. It will show you what these Christians believe about Bible prophecy. You will be able to see for yourself."

The book shakes me. I read verses that the book quotes from the Bible and see that they have apparently foreseen events thousands of years before they happened! Unlike all this mystical hocus-pocus about "feeling God" or having a relationship with Jesus, this is evidence that I can hold in my hand. I run down to the Christian group, show them the book, and admit that it has caused me to think more seriously about the Bible.

"Who," Levy asks right away, "gave it to you?"

I know why he asks. If one of the Christians had given the book to me, it could make trouble for them because they aren't supposed to be proselytizing. When I say "Jimmy," everyone laughs. The irony isn't lost.

For the next few weeks I show the book to everyone. Though Jimmy and Victor brush it off, I just can't, at least not so easily.

"Then go pray," Jimmy snaps. For the first time since I arrived, I antagonize the Jews more than the Christians.

"You're not serious about this religion stuff," Victor says, annoyed as we sit on the lawn by his house one afternoon. "If you are, I'd get a few rabbis over here, and

they'd end this whole thing fast. Do you want me to bring them here?"

"Naw, naw," I say, "I'm not serious."

And I'm not—at least not *really* serious. Though I'm a long way from asking Jesus or Moses to forgive my "sins" or anything like that, I want to know how the Bible could predict events thousands of years before they happened without being supernaturally inspired. If it was supernaturally inspired, then God exists, and if God exists, I want to know.

The book is another complicating factor thrown into the religious confusion that piles up in my head like a junkyard. As usual with me, though, the excitement soon dwindles, I put the book away, and continue doing nothing but writing my novel. I don't have time for all these religious questions. I have time only to write.

As I continue to live within the lines of the book, months pass. As quickly as winter blew in, it blows out, and spring and summer ease over the land. An urge to flee pulses through me. I need the excitement, the stimulation of a city. The hum of the crowds, the throb of traffic, all beat in sync to the rhythms within me. Writing itself can be solitary enough, but as I sit in Jack's room along the upper corner of the Galilee, on what seems like the far edge of the inhabited world, the loneliness and sense of alienation get painful. Most of my friends are gone, Tine and I broke up long ago, and except Seeger, my Dutch friend who left last year, no one here understands the passion that pulses through my blood. I need a change.

But my main reason for leaving is the novel. Part of it occurs in a slum section of Copenhagen called Christiania. At one time a sprawling military barracks in the midst of the city, Christiania was taken over by hundreds of young people who formed their own subculture there after the base had been abandoned. I had visited Christiania—a vast conglomeration of old buildings covered with graffiti and inhabited by squatters—on my second trip to Europe. Because Rufus and Katie hid out for a while in Chris-

tiania. I will go there, soak in what I can, and then pour it out onto the pages. If I can find a way to survive and write, I might stay in Christiania, though a French boy on the kibbutz last year said that his father could get me a job in Paris.

Before leaving, I talk one afternoon with Levy in the metal shop, where he works as a welder.

"Listen, man," I say as we talk religion, a topic that I always initiate. "maybe what you have is the truth. I don't believe it, not for a minute, but I am *open*. I'm open to anything. But I will never believe unless God proves Himself to me. I need a sign, a vision, some proof that it is true, or I will never accept, never."

"Have you," he replies, looking up from his work, "asked God to reveal Himself to you?"

"Ask God . . . ?" I stutter. "I mean, how can I talk to a God I don't really believe in? I mean . . . I've just opened my mind to the fact that God could exist, and, yeah . . . I suppose that in an indirect way I have asked, but I am going to need some pretty direct proof."

"You'll get it," he says.

"You think so?"

"I guarantee it."

I laugh nervously.

A few days later, with my black sleeping bag, a small backpack containing a few clothes and my novel (twice as thick as when I arrived), I leave Gadot. I catch a bus to Jerusalem and wander down to the Wailing Wall, where a young Jew stands praying. The same conflict arises within me, the same questions. Either he is talking to the Creator of the universe, or he is mumbling into a pile of rocks. I wish I knew which.

I spend that evening at an ultraorthodox yeshiva called *Ashai Hatori*, where they train Jews in the faith. I sit in the room where all these bearded Jews dressed in black chant and pray, their books spread out in their palms while they rock back and forth. Young Jews from the States encourage me to stay and study. I would except for the book,

which controls my life outside the pages as much as I control the lives inside the pages. The book comes first, even before God.

Before I leave in the morning, I talk with one of the rabbis. We sit in a room with wooden tables and chairs where Jews, dressed in black, study sacred writings. I feel as if I am in seventeenth-century *shtetl* in the old country, the kind my relatives came from.

"Listen, rabbi," I say. "These Christians told me that Jesus is the Messiah. Can you show me once and for all from the Bible that he isn't?"

"Ah, that's easy," he says, opening a Bible, his long black beard touching the pages. He points to some texts in English, which we read together.

"As you can see," he says, "these verses show that the Messiah is to come from the House of David."

"Did Jesus come from the House of David?"

"No."

"OK," I answer, "thanks a lot," and that day I fly to Athens, uneasy and confused.

Chapter 6

Called by Name

Walking through a muddy courtyard littered with debris and dope dealers, I hear a woman scream. Ahead of me, near an entrance in a graffiti-coated fence, I see her sprawled in the mud as a man with shaggy blond hair kicks her in the face. A few people stand around, doing nothing. *I've got enough problems. I don't want to get involved.* Yet the nearer I get, the louder she screams. Knowing that I don't need this hassle, I walk over anyway, and as I prepare to say something like, "Hey, man, I know the ladies need a little straightening out once in a while, but this is a bit much," he stops kicking her, and she flees through the entrance. Thinking I did my good deed for the day, I walk away when a noise explodes through my head, jerking it to the side and hurling my glasses from my face. Stunned, I realize that he punched me in the mouth.

I'm not a fighter. No inflammatory hormones, or whatever it is that endows some people with the killer instinct, surges within my veins. If anything, all that flows within me is milk. One time, when I was eleven years old, a kid punched me in the head, and when my father asked why I didn't hit him back, I said that I was afraid I'd hurt him. At college, though, I did lift weights and work out on a

heavy bag. Punching this bag hour after hour, day after day, I developed a powerful punch. Anyone would.

I am a southpaw, he stands on my left, and without hesitation I turn around and drive a fist into his nose. He bends at the waist, and with all my weight behind it, I plummet a right hook into his cheek, and he drops with a squeal. Yet he had knocked the glasses from my head, and I can't see. Because I don't want to be groping for them in the mud while he gets up to finish the fight, I yank him up, wrap him in a full nelson and, pushing his face toward the ground, yell, "Find my glasses! Find my glasses!"

I then see the glasses and scoop them up, unbroken. I am in a foreign country, with little money, and had he broken my specs, the milk within my veins could have soured enough to make me impale him on the fence.

"OK, man," I say, relieved, "it's over. I got nothing against you, so I'm going to let you go, and we're going to be friends. OK?"

As I hurl him to the ground, the force of his weight makes my knee and back give out. A sharp pain goes through both, but I don't have the time to think about it because he jumps up, screams, "I'm going to kill you!" and pulls out a knife. Boxing or no boxing, I run out of the entrance of Christiania into the street. Like a scene from a Keystone cops film, I'm running down the block yelling, "Help, police!" while he pursues me.

I race for a few blocks before two uniformed policemen jump out of a cruiser and grab my stalker, taking the knife and putting him in the car. More police come, and they take me to the station, where I answer questions in a barren room while a drunk in the tank bangs the walls. When I ask about my assailant, the police say that he has been in trouble before.

"He's a *junker*," this old cop says, meaning *junkie*, but then tells me that they must let him go because the knife, according to Danish law, isn't long enough for an arrest.

"You're kidding!" I exclaim. "The guy is crazy."

"Sorry," the cop says, shrugging. "It's the liberal system."

An hour later I'm back in Christiania looking over my shoulder, fearful that this deranged little junkie might get a new knife and get even. Meanwhile, my back hurts, especially when I sit or lie down; my knee hurts when I stand; and when I walk, I limp.

All this, and I haven't been in Christiania two days!

Actually, nothing is working, not from the moment I landed in Athens and stood for two hours by the baggage claim waiting for my knapsack, which never appeared. Just as I panicked, I turned around and there on another winding conveyer belt sat my backpack—the only piece left. I hitched across Greece, Yugoslavia, Austria, Germany, and Holland, stopping in Utrecht, where I visited Seeger, my Dutch friend, who lived in a run-down attic above a condemned apartment building. The day I arrived, Seeger left for Amsterdam to help a friend edit a film. I read Hemingway novels and danced to *Fleetwood Mac* until the people below complained about my hoofing it on the floor over their heads. After a few days, he still hadn't returned, and I felt hurt and insulted, especially because I had been struggling with loneliness to begin with. Seeger, so wrapped up in his own little world, had forgotten about me, and what depressed me more was that for the first time I realized how my own insensitivities had hurt others. Seeger returned after a week and, realizing what he had done, tried to do penance by taking me out to eat at the Pannenkoakhuis, but I left the next day.

"Forget it," I told him, as I walked out the door, my backpack slung over my shoulder. "I probably would have done the same to you."

In Copenhagen, I visit a Dane named Hans, who lives with his mother in a swank apartment on the other end of the city. I had met him three years earlier, on my second trip to Europe.

I'm nineteen, planning my trip, when the woman whom my kid sister baby-sits for gives her the address of her brother in Copenhagen. Because I have never met the woman, or the brother, I decide not to visit. But two months

later, in Copenhagen, I happen to notice the name of the street and the number of the building that I am standing in front of. Thinking, *This sounds familiar*, I pull out the paper my sister gave me. I stand at the exact address! Believing that someone is trying to tell me something, I go in, hoping to get a room for the night. I end up mooching off of Hans and his mother for a month.

I look forward to visiting Hans again. When we first met, he had talked about the occult and how he had supernatural powers; he had even experienced a supernatural healing. I hardly listened then because I had no interest in religion. Now, since my year at Gadot and the influence of Levy, I am more open to spiritual realities—especially now as my knee and back injuries make me more distrustful of the flesh.

Yet the day I visit he falls into a tormented drunken stupor. He sits in a chair, a massive bookshelf stacked with occult books behind him, and squirms hour after hour—slamming fists into the seat cushions or stomping feet on the carpeted floor. I have never witnessed such suffering, and I imagine that if I were to put on 3-D glasses or something, I would see red demons with pointed tails pour out of the walls, squeezing drool and sobs out of Hans as if he were a macabre doll. Even after I leave, the oppression, the heaviness that pervaded his house lingers, as if one of his demons latched onto me.

Also, from the moment I walk in, Christiania seems dirtier, more degraded and decadent than I remember. After a hundred feet in the courtyard, someone tries to sell me hash, and the farther in I go, the more dope dealers I meet per fifty yards. A conglomeration of dilapidated buildings coated in graffiti are piled inside the fence; and, as if in an open-air market, people sit in windows calling out competitive prices for hashish, the main staple of Christiania. Dogs and naked dirty children roam. A few adults even walk around in the buff too. In the bars people drink beer, smoke hash, and deal drugs. In one bar a disgusting old woman who looks like a bag lady walks around in a

sneaker without laces (her other foot is bare), cleaning up tables by putting the debris in a milk carton. I lose my appetite.

Away from the buildings, things get less intense. Small dirt paths (no cars here) wind through acres of trees and woodlands. A sleepy river cuts through woods, and a small lake calmly reflects trees and a square patch of sky. Houses—some looking as if they once had been comfortable, others, haphazard and ramshackle, are scattered along the path. Unlike the squalor of the "urban" section, these "suburbs" are more civilized. One house looks solar heated. I heard that Christiania had once been different, that people had tried to form a decent, alternative community here. Obviously, the experiment soured, and though a few original idealists remain, Christiania swarms with drug addicts, alcoholics, and derelicts who proliferate here like virus in a swamp.

I find lodging in a large house along the lake. I just lay my sleeping bag on the floor next to a number of other people who do the same. This aspect symbolizes one good thing about Christiania: I, a stranger, arrive and get a free room. That philosophy manifests itself here in numerous ways. One long-haired junkie describes it best: "You come to Denmark, get a free place to stay in Christiania, and then get on welfare. It's great!"

I meet a German boy who says he used to be a junkie but now is an alcoholic. As we sit outside, I kick over a bottle of Danish beer.

"Hey," he protests, "be careful. A bottle of beer—it is a living thing."

I talk philosophy with anyone coherent enough to carry on a conversation. I always seek to talk about religion, truth, God. I have met all sorts of people with fascinating religious and philosophical ideas on this trip, everyone from Christians to Buddhists to atheists.

"Are you a philosopher?" this strung-out American asks one afternoon as we sit around a picnic table in front of the house.

"Yeah," I say, "me and Mickey Mouse."

I befriend a blond Finnish boy who sells books that he has displayed on a table. At least he isn't peddling dope, which seems to be all that anyone here does, except maybe work in bars. He sells the heavies: Rilke, Faulkner, Wittgenstein, Hegel, Kant, Gaddis—and he reads them too. We have great philosophical conversations, and I am impressed, not only with his intelligence, but because he seems like an honest seeker for truth.

"Any books you want," he says, "I get for you," and the next day, sure enough, he has whatever I ask for.

"How do you always get such good books," I ask, "all brand new?"

"I *stealed* them," he says.

One morning I sit in a bar when a pale-skinned woman with freckles, about eight months pregnant, enters. I think of all the love between a mother and her baby, of all the love that must be generated here, and I feel so left out, so far away and lonely that a cold pain grips my chest. I have been squelching loneliness since I left Gadot, but at the sight of this gentle pale face my pain surfaces. I want to burst out crying. Then she raises an arm, and I see a blue tattoo on her hand. A *tatoo!* She's probably an unmarried junkie whose dope-addicted infant will be raised in this filth. For a moment, instead of loneliness, I am overwhelmed with disgust.

I write a poem about the pregnant lady and her *tatoo*. Since I left Gadot, through poetry I have been pouring out the pain and loneliness within me. When I stayed at Seeger's, I went to the zoo, and what interested me were not the zebras and elephants but a dried-up old lady in a green dress who worked in the men's restroom. I wrote a poem about her, about when she didn't have wrinkles, about when she wore long sequined gowns and danced in her lover's arms under bristling chandeliers as her perfume and dreams ascended to the stars. Now, all that ascends is the stench of the men's toilet at the city zoo where she works—a mop and bucket at her side. I wondered

what would happen to my dreams—would they be fulfilled, or would I, like this old lady, wind up with nothing but a cigar box of change in my hands?

I visit Hans again. Because self-pity steadily consumes any reservoirs of compassion stored within me, I have nothing left for him.

"I see what good," I say bitterly, "all your religious beliefs have done you."

Drooling, he forces out a sentence: "Cliff . . . Cliff . . . twenty years ago I . . . I asked for Jesus. Instead . . . instead, I got the devil."

I get the devil out of there. I don't know anything about Jesus, the devil, any of that. But if I never believed in the devil before Hans, I could believe now. I can't take any more, not as depressed as I am. I decide not to return.

That evening I sit in one of Christiania's greasy bars and smoke hashish with Greenland Eskimos. I started smoking pot when I was fourteen years old, but by the time I turned twenty, I was so committed to writing fiction that I rarely got high. Nevertheless, once in a while I did some serious dope smoking, and deep down I knew that one reason I resisted religion was because I knew that if I ever did get religious, I would have to stop smoking completely, something I didn't want to do.

Hashish, like pot, magnifies your sensitivities. If you feel good before smoking, you feel great after; if you feel bad, you feel worse. Considering my depression, I should not have smoked, and that night I tap into the nastiest brain-waves that have ever flowed through my mind. Like the dark side of the moon, the dark side of my mind, the side never seen, faces me, and I confront all the ugliness of my life at once.

I jump up, leaving my hashish on the table before some surprised Eskimos, and flee outside, hoping those painful thoughts will linger behind in the smoke of the bar, but they follow as close as my soul. I walk the night, trying to get control of my mind, trying to contain the negative energy that sizzles through me like electricity. I swear to

myself that if I get through this night alive I will never smoke again.

I survive intact, eventually going to sleep. I wake up certain that my pot-smoking days have ended—forever.

I have garnered enough material from Christiania for my book. In many ways, Christiania, born out of alienation, serves as the perfect background for Rufus and Katie, two children alienated from the world. But I can't write here. I need a calm, stable environment in order to create, and Christiania exists as if on the brink of anarchy, as if at any moment the buildings will collapse and people will run screaming through the streets. Lonely, depressed, not writing, and still fearful of that junkie, I decide to flee. I've journeyed enough to know that I can't get away from myself by traveling, and that my problems—like the pain in my knee—will follow no matter how far I go, yet I must get away. Also, hashish has become poison to my soul, and if I have no interest in smoking, why stay at Christiania? I will live in Paris instead.

I hitch to Seeger first, who's more cordial now, yet his spiritual vacuity frustrates me. I want to talk philosophy, religion, and God, but he has no interest.

"Even if there is a God," he says, "who cares?"

"How can you say that?" I reply. "If I knew there was a God, my life would change so dramatically it wouldn't be funny."

"It's not important," he says. "If there is a God, great. If not, not."

"But if God exists, then everything must extend from Him. He would have a purpose for our lives. We need to find out what that purpose is and then follow it. Can't you see?"

"Even if I had absolute proof that God existed," he says. "my life wouldn't change a bit."

After leaving Seeger, I hitch to Paris. When I arrive, I telephone a friend I met at the kibbutz, hoping to get a room for the night, but he says that he will see me tomorrow, meaning *You can't stay here*. Fortunately

Pierre, whose father was to get me work, brings me home and the next day finds me a nice room complete with bath and free of charge until I find a job. I wrote Pierre before I left Gadot, just to confirm my coming, and he wrote back that his father *couldn't* get me work after all, but I was already gone, probably standing along a road in Yugoslavia, my thumb in the air, by the time the letter reached Gadot.

As a solitary traveler, I have known the pangs of loneliness, but never so deep, so diminishing. Amid the endless throngs of Paris, I have dwindled to nothingness. If I laid on the floor in this room and died, no one would know except the rats that would nibble away at me until the stench finally lured someone to my door. On the subway one morning, a young woman cries bitterly, filling the car with her sobs, yet I have no compassion, no pity because I have spent it all on myself. Later that day, in a poem about the French girl and her cries, I tell her to shut up because "you're adding to my already headache."

I try to write my novel, to immerse myself in fantasy, but fantasy exists in my mind, and my suffering contaminates everything in it. I put a pen to the paper but, like oil splattered on a screen, pain spills over each image, and I throw down the pen and walk outside. I stand in the subway station and, as the train approaches, I imagine throwing myself under it. I've suffered before, but never seriously dabbled with suicide. Maybe Camus with his ultimate philosophical question was right after all. I am reading Camus again, this time in French. I walk by the Eiffel Tower, look up, and think of jumping off. Why not go out in style? My last free fall. Albert would be proud. Then a new idea pushes away that notion: *Hang on, maybe this Jesus stuff is true after all.*

I curse myself. My whole life I have always viewed religious people as weak, fragile, unable to handle reality, so they hide under little man-made steeples of lies. They can't face life, so they cloak themselves in myths and tales about God, heaven, and the good tooth fairy. What a cheap

way to live! Yet now, feeling too weak to handle reality, will I too cry out to God?

Never. I'd rather live with no hope than a false hope. I'd rather grovel through life than thrive on lies. I would rather be splattered at the base of the Eiffel Tower, crushed like a grape, than cushioned by tales, no matter how efficiently these concocted gods soothe the diseases of my soul. I am too honest a seeker to reach out for religion only because it kills pain. The fact that a believer might be happier than a skeptic means no more to me than the fact that a drunken man might be happier than a sober one. If God exists, He must reveal Himself to me; otherwise, I will not believe. I can't. That evening, I write a poem: "Show your face, God/ If you have one/ If you dare."

I sit in a phone booth and call my mother. Since the divorce, I've been much closer to her, much more than when I grew up. I know that she would do anything to help me. Right now, I believe she is the only person who cares, even if she is on the other end of the world and knows nothing of my suffering. Her voice sounds so good that the tears hovering for weeks on the edge of my eyes silently melt down my cheeks. I hate asking for money, but I'm going to run away again, this time back to Israel to finish my novel and maybe even to live there forever. When the money comes, I will travel by train to Italy, then by boat to Greece and Israel. I don't have the mental stamina now to hitchhike, especially in France, where hitchhiking is next to impossible.

A few days later, after the money arrives, I meet a bum in a park in front of the station as I await my train. We sit on a bench. I ask if he believes in God. He does.

"*Je crois,*" I answer, "*dans le diablé.*"

He shudders.

On the train I meet young American backpackers, and we cramp together on the floor, singing, eating, joking as we rattle all night across Italy. Just the thought of returning to friends and working on my book neutralizes the pain, especially because I enjoy myself so much now. We

sail to Greece and spend a few days on the island of Corfu. We live on the beach, rent motor scooters, and sit at sunny outdoor cafes drinking cool wine, eating seafood, and talking about my favorite subject: religion and God. One morning, I stand on a mountain while the sea before me shimmers in the sunlight like burning sapphire. As the colors of the island and the sky and the sea dazzle me with their beauty, I can believe that God exists.

I sail into Haifa. Whatever my spiritual longings, I am a Jew, and Israel is my second home. I ride a bus to Gadot and surprise everyone with my unexpected return. Unfortunately, the leaders won't let me stay. Some of the old pain that I had hoped to leave in Europe resurfaces, but I'm so glad to see my friends again, I don't allow it to crush me. I will find a new kibbutz, make new friends, and resume my novel.

I tell Levy about how I considered killing myself, but the thought that maybe this religion stuff was true pushed the idea out of my head. "I'm open, Levy, maybe now more than ever. But as I have said before, if God exists, He needs to reveal Himself to me. I need a sign, something. Otherwise, I will never believe. I just can't."

Days later, I take a bus to Tel Aviv, to get assigned to a new kibbutz. As I sit in the office, an American boy ahead of me talks with the woman about finding a kibbutz. Waiting, I notice on her desk a sheet of paper with my name on it.

"Excuse me," I say to the woman, interrupting the conversation. "I'm curious. How did you know that I was coming?"

"I didn't know you were coming," she says. "Who are you?"

I point to the paper and say, "Clifford Goldstein."

"No!" the boy exclaims, jumping from his seat. "That's for me! My name is Clifford Goldstein!"

After the excitement calms down, I ask Cliff, a tall, slender, dark-haired Jew about my age, "Where are you from?"

"Miami Beach," he answers.

"I'm from Miami Beach too!" I shout.

We can hardly believe the coincidence! After we again calm down, I tell him: "Listen, have I got the kibbutz for you. You go to my old kibbutz and tell them that your name is Clifford Goldstein and that you are from Miami Beach, and see what happens!"

He goes to Gadot, and I get assigned to a kibbutz, Ein Gev, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where I swim each night, the lights of Tiberius shimmering on the other shore. A few Christians live at Ein Gev as volunteers, and I jump into conversations with them and anyone interested in religion. I quickly get the reputation of being religious, which I'm not. I'm just seeking, perhaps harder than ever. One evening, when some volunteers smoke hash in a room, they offer me the warm pipe. I would inhale fumes from the tailpipe of a bus before I would put that in my mouth.

"Why," this French boy mocks, "because it's not in the Bible?"

One evening a blond German couple on the kibbutz, Christians, drive me in their blue Mercedes to a prayer meeting in Tiberius. I ask a bright-eyed sixteen-year-old American Jew named Mike if he wants to come, and he does. We sit in a circle of chairs in an apartment with about twenty Christians, including some Sabras who believe in Jesus. One of them reads a verse: "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" I start to debate them all, yet the fire in my arguments has sputtered into smoke. I already know the answers. I feel impressed, convicted, but I just don't believe—and I refuse to make myself try. If God can do anything, such as turn water into wine, raise the dead, and speak from the sky to Moses, then He can reveal Himself to me. Until then, I'm not budging.

Toward the end of their meeting, they start praying. It happens again. I try to hold it in, even jam my sleeve in my mouth, but laughter squeals out, mixing with their prayers.

A few days later on the kibbutz, someone asks: "What

did you do to Mike? The kid is walking around at night reading the Bible by candlelight."

"I didn't do anything to him!" I exclaim. "Don't blame me for that!"

After a few weeks, I decide to leave Ein Gev. I am getting little writing done. Frustrated, I can't get religious questions out of my head. I talk and think about nothing else. I still have no answers, no proof, yet I sense that I totter on the brink of something climactic in my life and that God will be at the center of it, whatever it is. My Mexican roommate, a Catholic boy, loves to talk religion, and our conversations affect him deeply. The day I leave, he looks me in the eyes and says: "Things are happening, Cliff. Things are happening."

I laugh nervously. I know what he is talking about, sort of, but I'm still confused. I plan to return to that yeshiva in Jerusalem to talk to the rabbis. Maybe I will stay, even become an Orthodox Jew, who knows? But it's Friday afternoon, Sabbath soon begins, and no bus goes to Jerusalem. Only one more bus will come, and that will take me to Gadot. I go there instead.

When I arrive, I check out Clifford Goldstein from Miami Beach. Of all the rooms on the kibbutz, he not only stays in my old room but sleeps in my old bed too. I sit on the other bed and talk to him about these bizarre coincidences. At one point I look up at the bookshelf. When I had left Gadot for Denmark, I didn't take my poetry books because I didn't want to lug them in my knapsack. A few still remain right where I had left them.

"Cliff," I ask, "do you like my books?"

"No," he says, "those are all my books."

"Impossible. Those are mine."

"No, Cliff, those are *my* books."

I walk over and grab my old copy of Sylvia Plath. Same author, same title, same edition, but it didn't have my scribbling in it! I find a few more books that I had left, but they are his books instead!

"I can't believe this," I say, dropping to his bed. I don't

know why, but I look Clifford Goldstein in the face and ask, "Are you a writer?"

"Yes!" he exclaims. "I want to be a writer, and I came to the kibbutz to write!"

Then his girlfriend, whom he met at Gadot, walks in. She's blond, Danish, and he introduces me to her.

"Her name," he says, "is Tine."

"No, no, no, don't tell me that!"

Later, I sit dumbfounded in a room with Asher and Levy. Everyone on the kibbutz is amazed. No one can believe it, least of all me, except the Christians, who don't seem that surprised.

"You were asking God for signs," Asher says. "What more do you want? The Lord is calling you by name!"

I step outside. A supernatural hand must have arranged my meeting Clifford Goldstein because it couldn't be a coincidence—it *couldn't be*! Goose bumps tingle my flesh. What can explain how I could meet someone with my same name, from my same town, in the same room, same bed, same books, same occupation, a girlfriend with the same name from the same country?

The next day I walk to the river with the Christians. They stand along the shore, while Asher, Levy, and I wade in. Behind us, an Israeli on the opposite bank casts a net into the water while they baptize me in the Jordan River.

Chapter 7

Hot Bestseller

Yet nothing changes. I'm no more born-again than a corpse, nor do I have a relationship with God. I believe, but that's it. Something is lacking, missing—what, I don't know. I'm sure that God exists, but I feel no commitment, no surrender to Him. I am committed only to my book.

I decide to go back to America. I get little writing done here, so I will return to Gainesville. I know that I'm running away again, but I leave anyway, telling no one about the baptism. I spend the night in Jerusalem with a friend, an American in the Israeli army who sits in his room and snorts heroin off a handglass, his voice getting runnier as each line of powder disappears up his nose. He licks the glass when done. He asks me to send him LSD after I get back.

"Sure, Frank," I lie, "I'll send you LSD."

I fly out the next day. After landing in Amsterdam, I buy two apples and, rushing to catch my connecting flight, I look at them closely—so lush, colorful, rich—and am thrilled! I tell the girl next to me on the plane all about the love of God I see pouring out of these apples.

"Look!" I say. "I can't believe that I've never seen it before. Can't you see what this says about God?"

"I think," she says, "that you're into your apples too much. Why don't you just eat them?"

My mother picks me up at the airport. She has sold our home and now rents a small apartment north of Miami Beach.

In her kitchen, I write to a friend, telling about my baptism in the Jordan River, and my mother sees the letter on the table and reads it.

"Did you get baptized?" she asks, aghast. "I read what you wrote!"

"No, no," I lie. "I was just kidding."

Frowning, she drops the subject.

We visit my grandmother in her condominium on Miami Beach. As I thumb through her religious books, she says, "Why don't you become a rabbi? You have such an interest in religion. I will send you to the seminary in Cincinnati."

"But, Grandma," I say, half jesting, "I believe in Jesus."

"Oh!" she says, "don't be silly. They will cure you of that."

A few days later I drive to Gainesville. A block away from the library, I rent a yellow shack raised up on cement blocks, one of many scattered throughout the student ghetto. I occasionally find street people and bag ladies sleeping under the shacks, which doesn't bother me except that in winter they build fires under them.

I wouldn't need to live around bag ladies if I would find a decent job, but I want to write, not work. Eventually I peddle snow cones three afternoons a week to school children who storm my white truck and plop their dimes and quarters on the counter in exchange for cups of ice covered with sticky red, green, and blue chemicals. Between that job and eating lunch on the plaza lawn with the Hare Krishnas, I pay the \$80 per month rent and fill my stomach three times a day.

Most importantly, for the first time since I left Gadot for Denmark, I'm writing again. That time away from the book gave me the distance I need to see changes that must be

made. Because I have stopped reading so much poetry, its influence on me has waned, and I no longer incorporate every imaginable poetic device into the novel. Reading over what I have written, I see that I will have to wrench out some excessive literary frills. Now, with my style loosening up, the words flow out of my fingers faster than ever.

Also, now more open and sympathetic to God, I develop the idea of faith as a minor theme. From the start I made Katie religious, and every time she prayed, her prayers were answered. One night, in a stolen rowboat on a lake, she and Rufus are drenched in a storm. When she prays for help, the rain ceases, the clouds blow away, exposing a night sky full of stars, and a warm breeze from the shore whistles across the water and dries them. Rufus sits amazed. How far I will take that theme, I don't know. It all depends, I suppose, on what happens to me.

One Saturday, I drive out to Palatka. I ask about Harold and John, who never returned. Apparently, they had taken the Lodestar to South America, loaded it up with marijuana, and as the plane took off, the police machine-gunned it. Harold and John died in the crash.

Most faces at Palatka are new. Memories roll out of my mind like sky divers in free fall. I remember the time I almost bounced after I had cut away my tangled Russian PC—and, as I watch strangers pack their parachutes, plan their jumps, teach students how to land, I realize that had I died that day, this scene would be the same. My death would have affected nothing here. What do I expect? The influence of Harold and John, who once ran the place, has vanished, so why should I think that my death would matter? I don't know why, but the thought that it wouldn't saddens me. Life can seem so meaningless.

My knee still hurts, my back still hurts, and I barely have enough money to eat, much less sky dive. I sense, too, that my life is heading in a radically different direction and that sky diving will not be part of it. I place an ad in the main trailer, offering to sell my equipment, and leave.

Driving away, I think of Harold and John, of how fleet-

ing human existence can be. I had made over 200 jumps, could have bounced on any one of them, almost did once. Looking back, I sense that God had a hand on me, even then. I still believe that my life teeters on the verge of something climactic, though I don't know what. Perhaps God kept me alive because He has plans for me. Who knows?

My friends express surprise at how freely I, who used to harangue Jed Smock, profess faith in God. I even have a Bible, a black leather-bound Torah that my grandmother gave me, but the stories seem ridiculous. After the experience with Clifford Goldstein, I know that *anything* could happen—but a talking snake, wafers falling out of the sky, and a Jew living in the belly of a fish for three days? *Come on!*

I believe that a supernatural power, or force, must exist (how else can the experience with Clifford Goldstein be explained?), and I draw comfort from that belief. I even talk about Jesus. I figure that if I were going to believe in the Old Testament, I might as well believe in the New too. Still, I have questions about both.

Weeks pass, and I quit peddling snow cones. One friend wants me to pick psilocybin mushrooms and sell them with him, but my newfound faith, however loosely defined, gives me a sense of moral obligation. I won't sell drugs, especially now that I don't use them myself—haven't for months.

Down my street lives Terry, a homosexual *Premie* who rooms with his boyfriend, another *Premie*, and sometimes we get into heavy spiritual discussions. One time they almost convince me to attend their spiritual meetings.

"Maybe I will go," I say. "Maybe."

The next afternoon, it happens again.

The first time occurs on the kibbutz at Ein Gev. Having worked all morning in the banana fields, I take a shower and then stretch out on the bed in my small room, the door and window wide open. As I relax, a strange vibration rolls up from my feet and legs, centering in my head until I feel

encapsulated in a gray mist that buzzes like static on an empty TV channel. I feel as if I am falling through a wind tunnel. I scream inside, Lord, I am going to die! Instantly, I sit up shaking, sweating.

What was that?

I don't know, only I am surprised that I called on the Lord because I am not sure I believe in the Lord. A few days later, as I relax on the bed, the experience returns, and I again sit up shaking from fear.

When I come back to the States, it continues: the tingling, the buzzing, the mist, the sensation of falling through a tunnel. Yet each time I become less fearful and more curious. Next time, instead of fighting it, I will go with the flow.

Now, relaxing in my room, the tingling in my toes begins again. *Take it easy.* The vibrations move up my body and into my head. *Don't fight it!* Instantly I fly out of my body and ascend straight through the ceiling. I see, fleetingly, the beams underneath the roof and never slow down until I hover outside the second-floor balcony of Terry's apartment. Around me the mist crackles, buzzes, colors everything gray. Numb with fear, I want to stop. Suddenly I'm sitting up on the bed, astounded.

The next day, I stand in front of my yellow shack when three people run down the street, two chasing the third. As a writer, I'm always looking for experiences, so why not follow? I catch up with the two, who are gasping on a street corner. The third fellow has disappeared.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"This man stole something from my health food store," one of them says with a thick eastern European accent.

"If I catch the guy," I ask, "will you give me a job? Please, I need a job."

"We can't talk about that now," he says, looking at me as if I'm crazy.

The next day I walk toward the university library to read about the occult. After that out-of-body experience, I know that a whole new dimension exists, that a separate reality

of which I know nothing about now hovers within my reach, and I want to enter it. Maybe here I will find answers that I have been seeking.

I have been baptized, I read the Bible, I even utter a feeble prayer once in a while, but nothing has happened. No voices from heaven, no angels, no visions, no miracles, nothing. I write Levy, telling him that I'm not born-again, I don't have a relationship with God, and perhaps spiritualism, not the Bible, has the truth I seek.

On the way to the library, I stop at that health food store that was robbed the day before. It's closed, but I knock. The man I talked to yesterday, small, dark haired, with blue eyes, comes outside. He's Hungarian, and because my first impression is that he is an atheist, I say something about religion and God.

"What?" he says, instantly dragging me into the store and locking the door.

We sit inside a small wooden shop with bright blue Swiss-Alp wallpaper, and I tell him about my out-of-body experiences. As a Christian, he warns me about getting involved in the occult. He exudes a warm, friendly, bubbly personality, yet when he says that the devil is behind my experiences, I laugh.

"Come on, Steve," I jest, "do you also believe in Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer?"

Nevertheless, impressed, I want to talk religion with him again. Like Levy, he has a character—an openness, a warmth, a sincerity—that draws me to him. Steve has something that I covet for myself. Before I leave, he hands me a book.

"Here," he says, "read this. It will open your eyes to what you're playing with."

Inside the library, I look up *spiritualism* in the card catalog, find a title, and pull it off the shelf. Because I am not enrolled in school, I can't check books out. Instead, I walk into the second-floor sanctuary, where I had spent endless hours in years past, and read. After finishing the first chapter of the occult book, I close my eyes and prac-

tice the initial technique. I then look for a place to hide it because I don't want anyone checking it out until I finish. Walking through the library, I carry the occult book in one hand and the book Steve gave me—titled *The Great Controversy*—in the other. I've not heard of either one before.

The next afternoon, I walk over to a cafe. Writing all day, my fingers pumping words onto the paper like a teletype machine, I have never been more optimistic, more positive of success. One more year, perhaps, and my first novel will be finished. It will be a bestseller. The thought makes me glow.

Like most writers, though, my personal life is a shambles. Almost broke, I don't have a job or a desire to find one. I live in a shack surrounded by street people, and I'm so broke I've even eaten a few times at a Catholic rescue mission. My back hurts, my knee hurts, and I don't have medical insurance.

But I'm writing. Nothing else matters.

I wander back home. Evening eases over the streets. I sit in my room, the front door open, and slip a sheet of paper into the typewriter. As I put my finger on the keys, I sense a presence, as if a person stepped inside. I turn around.

Ten minutes before, if someone had asked me if I believed in Jesus I would have said maybe. At this moment, I believe beyond question. His Spirit manifests itself so distinctly, so clearly and powerfully that I know exactly who He is and what He wants. And yet, for some reason, I'm not surprised. I sensed this coming for a long time.

Cliff, you have been playing with Me long enough. If you want Me tonight, burn the novel

I jump up.

"Please, God—not this! Let me finish, and then I will give my life to you."

If you want Me tonight, burn the novel

"Please, I will write it all to Your glory, but let me keep it."

If you want Me tonight, burn the novel

"Please, let me just put it away for a while."

Burn the novel.

I flee outside. A bluish light tints the streets, and a distant dog's lonely bark chops the stillness. I walk fast.

Why does God want me to burn the book tonight? Tonight! At any other time—when the writing didn't flow so well, when I wasn't as close to finishing—the choice would have been easier.

And it is my choice. Levy has told me all along that God doesn't force men to obey Him. I'm now experiencing that freedom. Aware that the choice is mine, I can say, *Go away, God; I want my book more than You*. He will, and I can continue writing.

Nevertheless, the same Lord who three thousand years ago told the Jews, "You shall have no other gods before me," tells me this same thing tonight. For months I have been squelching the subtle conviction that my unwavering devotion to the novel needed to be directed to God alone. Tonight, however, the conviction isn't subtle. The novel is my god [*you shall have no other gods before me*], and if I want the true God, the false one must burn.

Dusk vanishes, swallowed up by the earth. Nearby, TV light sparkles in the window of a house, and far away a police siren scratches the sky. No matter how far I walk, the conviction that has been prodding me for months, and that overwhelms me tonight, follows: If I want to get serious with God, the novel must go.

Every other tie, the things that could have kept me away from God, have been severed. The pain in my knee and back have made me leery of the flesh. Marijuana has vanished from my life. I possess little money, and no material goods control me. I have only my book, which is all I need, all I want. If I burn it, my dreams will vanish, just like the lady's in the Dutch toilet.

But why am I holding back? For a book that might never be published? Or even if published, a book that might sell only a few thousand copies? Or if it sold a million copies, was it worth it? *What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?* Tonight I may find out.

What will my family say? What will my friends say? Who will believe that Jesus told me to burn it? They will think I copped out. I can hear them now. "Ah, Cliff, we knew you'd never be a writer. We knew you were all talk. Jesus told you to burn the book? Come on!" If I burn that book I will have nothing left in this world. My hopes, my dreams, my future will be ashes. I was going to set the world on fire with that novel, but now God is asking me to set the novel on fire instead?

I stop underneath the cold, dull light of a street lamp. Bugs, in a frenzied dance around the bulb, cast flickering shadows on the ground. Along these streets more than a year ago, I had walked out of the pizza joint, my soul burning with the desire to know truth—no matter the cost. Tonight, I confront that cost.

"OK, God," I say. "I want You, I want truth, more than I want anything, even the novel. But I just don't have it in me to burn it. If You want it burned, You are going to have to burn it Yourself. I can't."

When I finish that thought, the pressure, the pain, the turmoil instantly lift, as if giant invisible hands release their grip on me. The fear, the qualms, vanish. I teeter on the verge of a new existence; a rush of excitement surges through me.

When I asked God to burn the book, I thought perhaps lightning would crash through the window of my room and incinerate the novel. That is not how it will happen.

Disappearing into the darkness, I walk home, put the key in the door, and flip the switch. The room explodes into light. On my desk sits the typewriter, a blank sheet curled over the keys. Beside it the manuscript lies, inches thick. I grab the pages, turn my chair around, and sit. At my feet is an electric hot plate, the two burners coiled black and cold. I run my fingers on the edge of the paper. For a moment I laugh inside. *Goldstein, you're too much. Who's going to believe this?* I put the pages on a burner and turn the knob.

I sit, staring. Nothing happens. Then a stream of smoke,

as if from a cigarette, rolls around the side of the pages. Soon smoke pours out of the bottom of the pile and fills the room. While the novel smolders, I throw in the poems I had written in Europe. When ashes drop, I sweep them out the door.

Amid the smoke, I grope for the letter that I had written to Levy about the occult. For some reason, I never mailed it. I place it in on the smoldering pile and type a new one: "The smoke is clearing now," I start. "It took a long time to burn. My book! Two and a half years now sit as ashes on my doorstep. . . ."

In a few hours, the novel is scattered on my front porch—smoldering, like war ruins. The battle ends. I have surrendered, unconditionally. And though aware that my life has taken its most dramatic, radical turn, and that nothing will ever be the same again, I crawl into my bed and rest quietly, the smoke lingering like a divine presence.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

For months, surrounded by snowcapped Alps pasted on the health food store's walls, I study the Bible with Steve and two college students, Bernie Molnar and Ronnie Fox. We delve into prophecies fulfilled hundreds, even thousands of years after the prophets wrote them. The rise and fall of nations are depicted as accurately as in history books—only the prophets recorded the events centuries before they happened. No men, no matter how gifted or intelligent, could have written these words without divine aid. It is impossible. Daily, as we study the Bible, I get the intellectual evidence I need to sustain my faith.

I learn, too, that my mystical mind trips were all illusions, deceptions, and that I never really left my body but was duped into thinking I had. I had read stories such as in Dr. Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* about the clinically dead who come back to life, yet their accounts are exactly what I experienced: a buzzing sound, a sensation of a wind tunnel, a release from the body, a noisy mist—only I wasn't near dying! They no more left their bodies than I did. From my exposure to Hans, the door to the occult opened, and I unwittingly stepped through. Apparently,

that demon whom I picked up in Hans's apartment was more literal than I believed possible. Yet after I burned that novel and made that total commitment to Jesus, those illusions never returned.

They teach me also about Jesus, about who He is and what He has accomplished for humanity. I realize that sin is transgression of God's law, and that I have broken God's law, but that through faith in His atoning sacrifice I can be forgiven. And not only forgiven, but that through the power of His Spirit I can keep that law. I accept that forgiveness and the power that the Messiah offers, and I devote myself to Him, the absolute truth that I have been seeking all my life.

From being kicked out of the monastery in Wales, to detouring to Greece, to having that dream in the Athens park and then following that dream to Israel and winding up on one of the few kibbutzim that took in Christian groups—I see how God had been guiding all along, seeking to give me the truth that I so desperately desired.

Meeting Levy, who had such a profound impact on me, then going to Europe, being driven out of Scandinavia to Paris, being driven out of Paris back to Israel, not being allowed back at Gadot, then going to the kibbutz office and meeting my double just at a time when I was seeking signs—I was simply being given by God a personalized experience that would ultimately lead me to that absolute that I had wanted so badly, yet never knew what it was: the Messiah.

The Lord used those occult experiences too. Though they were not from Him, He allowed me to have them in order that I would know beyond question that when the Bible talks about evil, it's not talking allegory, poetry, or theology—but about powerful supernatural entities that control human minds. Fortunately, Jesus can break their hold on the human mind. He did for me.

Of course, questions reel through me. *Suppose I had gone to another kibbutz instead of Gadot when I first came to Israel? Suppose when I returned to Gadot they had let*

me stay, and I never met Clifford Goldstein? Suppose I had left Ein Gev on Thursday when buses were still running to Jerusalem, instead of Friday when they weren't, and rather than going back to Gadot I went to that yeshiva in Jerusalem to become an Orthodox Jew instead? Suppose I didn't burn my book? Suppose I chose to stick with the occult? What would have happened to me?

Who knows? All I know is that, looking back, I marvel at the providences of God in leading to where I now am!

When I tell my mother that I burned my novel for Jesus, she wants to send me to a psychiatrist. ("Cliff, you need help. I'm willing to give it to you.") When I refuse, she threatens to have me deprogrammed. Eventually, she calms down. My dad, meanwhile, takes a more stoic approach. "If it makes you happy," he says, "that's fine with me—but you shouldn't have told your mother."

A few months after burning the novel, I stand in front of the health food store. Ready to cross the street, I wait for a passing car. As it passes, a face looks out the window. *Clifford Goldstein!*

The car screeches. Cliff runs to me, I run to him, and we embrace. The last time we saw each other was in Galilee. I had no idea that he left Israel; he had no idea that I was in Gainesville. He had driven up from Miami Beach only for today to visit his brother!

"Incredible," he says. "I must admit, this is incredible!"

We talk. I witness about my faith in the Jewish Messiah Jesus, who had died as the perfect sacrifice for humanity and who fulfilled all the Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew Bible. Though astonished—not only at this unbelievable meeting, but at my beliefs—he is skeptical. I know the feeling. After half an hour, we exchange addresses, and he leaves.

Eventually, Jed Smock returns to the University of Florida, and I stand next to him, in the center of the crowd, as I had in the past. Now, instead of harassing him, cursing God, or spitting on his Bible, I preach to the students, many of whom still remember me as *Heckle*.

"I might not agree with everything Jed preaches," I say to the crowd, "or even the way Jed says it, but the truth is, each one of you knows deep inside that God exists."

Of course, it's only justice—they heckle me!

I take the abuse. For God alone knows how many more Clifford Goldsteins stand in the crowd, their curses covering the cries within.